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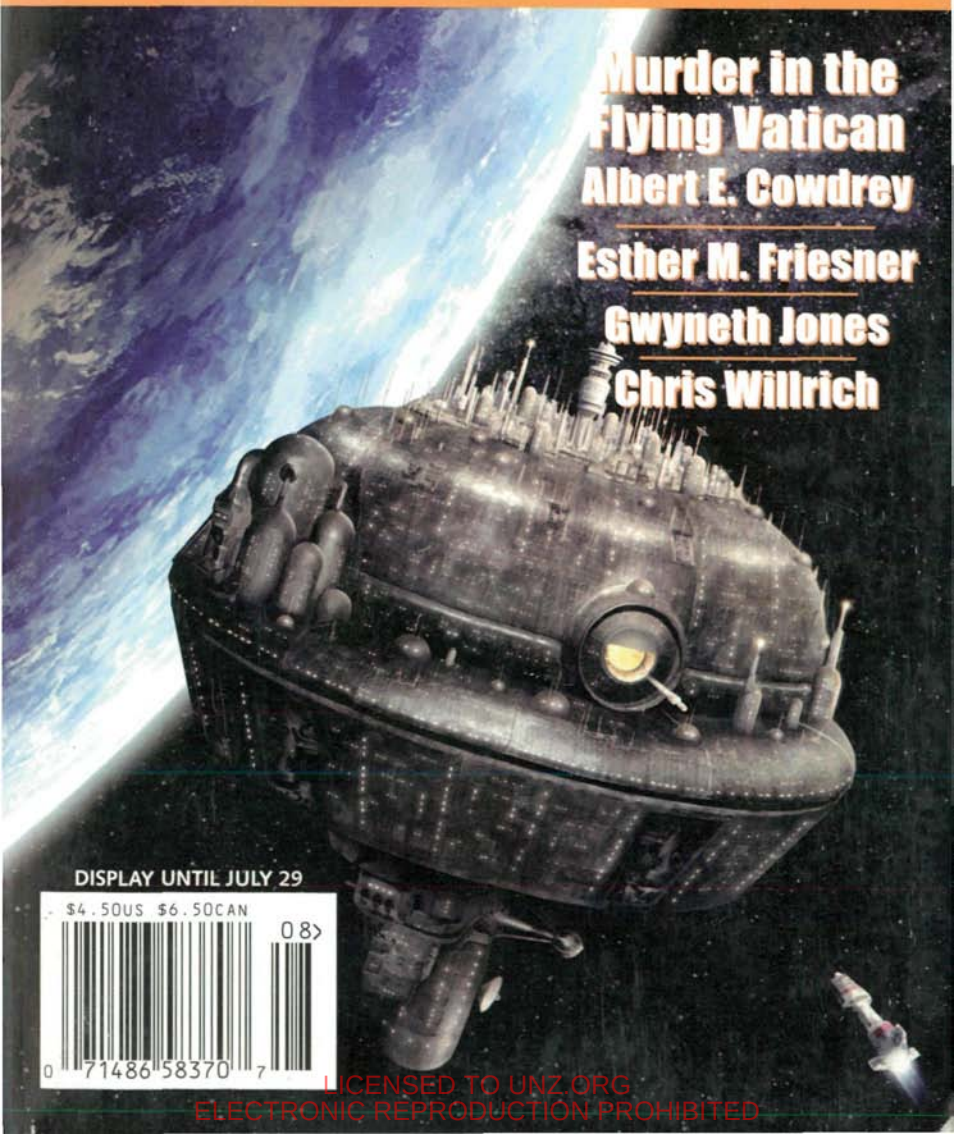

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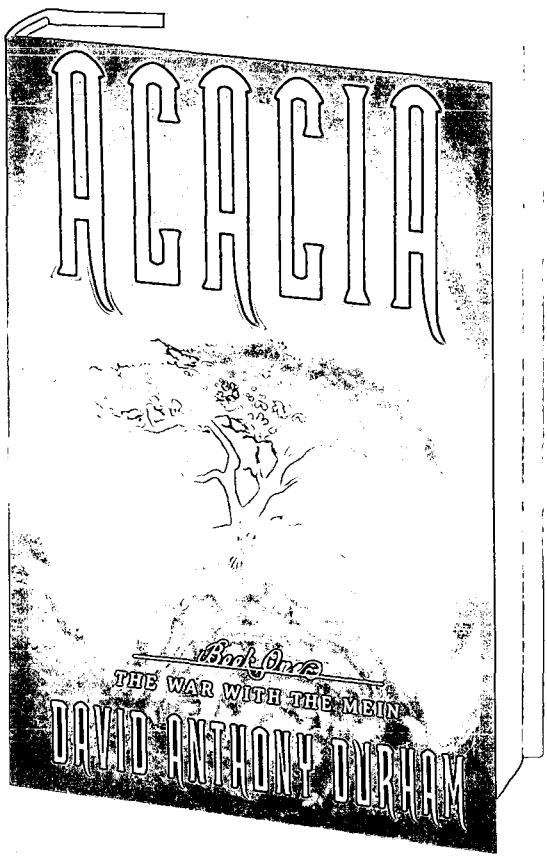

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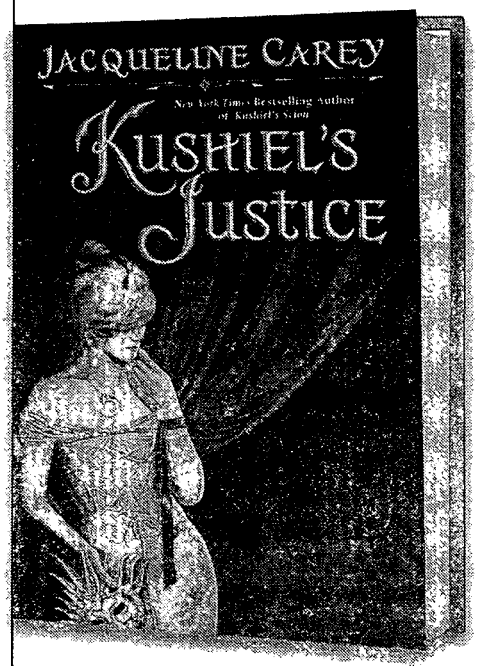

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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August • 58th Year of Publication

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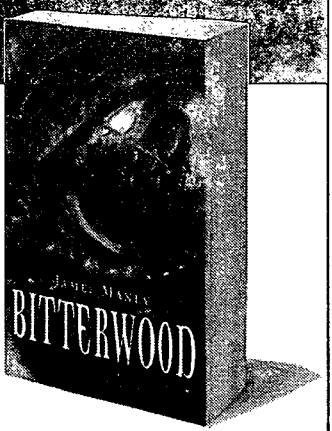

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Esther Friesner's last story to appear in our pages was "Helen Remembers the Stork Club" (Oct/Nov. 2005). She kicks off this month's issue on a light note.

At These Prices

By Esther M. Friesner

THE TIMING COULD HAVE *been better,* Bixby thought as he knocked smartly at the door of one of the Hotel Tiernan's rooms. *Still, this shouldn't take* too *long. I've only to inform Ms. Franklin that our other guests have been complaining about the noise since eight this morning. No doubt she'll be happy to cooperate.*

From the far side of the door came a monstrous squeaking of bedsprings accompanied by a hostile, exasperated, "Oh, what *now*?"

Or not. Bixby knocked again, more insistently. This produced "Who *is* it?" demanded in a tone of voice that added, *GO AWAY!*

Going away was not an option, not with the ease of so many other hotel guests at stake. He knocked a third time and in a crisp, no-nonsense voice announced, "Management, ma'am!"

"Management?" There was a moment's hesitation, then: "Come in!"

Bixby paused only long enough to check the pocket mirror he always carried. The gratifying reflection of a portly, presentable, fiftyish man, round-faced and ruddy-cheeked, dark of hair and eye, looked back at him.

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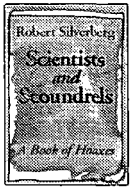

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This was no vanity issue. Hotel Tiernan policy dictated that looks *did* matter, especially for face-to-face work with the public. Satisfied that his appearance was a credit to his beloved employer, Bixby pocketed the mirror, touched his master key into the lock, and entered the room.

He was immediately confronted by the spectacle of Ms. Bella Franklin, clad in a tatty blue robe and nightgown, fluffy bunny-slippers on her feet, sprawled prone across the large, unlatched valise teetering on the bed. It took a mere instant for Bixby to deduce what was going on. Obviously the lady had been struggling with the unruly piece of luggage for quite some time, using every trick in the veteran suitcase-packer's handbook. Finally she'd pulled out the big guns, holding on tight and body-slamming it repeatedly, which caused the mattress and box spring beneath to evoke a torrid bout of romantic rapture. She looked to be in no mood for uninvited callers, but too bad about that. He had a job to do, and quickly. Time was passing, and some things couldn't — *daren't* — wait.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said. "My name is Bixby." He tapped the silver name badge pinned to the lapel of his trim gray suit. "There have been four calls to the front desk concerning the untoward level of noise coming from this room. I am here to inquire whether I might be of some assistance in resolving matters to the satisfaction of all our valued guests."

Bella gasped, all the while keeping her starfished hold on the green valise. "Are you implying what I *think* you are?"

"Ma'am?" Bixby raised one impeccable eyebrow.

"You thought I was *canoodling!* Well, I *never!*" (Bixby wondered if that were entirely true.) "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Ma'am, I assure you, I made no such conjecture," Bixby replied in his most soothing voice. "I merely came to look into the source of the complaints from — "

"The *source* happens to be this suitcase," Bella exclaimed, her drab brown hair bedraggled, her sallow cheeks dappled with splotches of red as she bounced on the recalcitrant luggage. "And if this hotel were worth even one tenth the outrageous prices you charge, you'd be trying to help me get it locked instead of standing there, making vile accusations!"

"Er, I'll do my best, ma'am." Bixby motioned for her to descend from the valise so that he might take a stab at shutting it. She clambered off

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slowly, her hands exerting constant pressure on the lid. He tried to work around her, but it proved impossible. At last he said, "Ma'am, why don't you step back and let *me* do this?"

Bella's face hardened. "It's *my* suitcase."

"Ma'am, I'm not arguing the point. I only mean that it would be easier to close if you'd let me — "

"I didn't ask for your help," Bella said stiffly.

"Ma'am, you did."

It was the truth, but that didn't stop her from snorting it to scorn. "I didn't *send* for you. I'm checking out this morning. I was trying to pack while waiting for my coffee to brew." She didn't dare remove her hands from the suitcase, so a nod of the head was all she could manage to direct his attention toward the little in-room coffee maker, merrily burbling away on the dresser.

"Coffee?" Bixby's gaze sought out the coffee maker and clamped onto the miniature glass carafe. A disquieting look of yearning crept into his eyes. He licked his lips and inhaled the scent of brewing beans as though he meant to draw the rich aroma into the depths of his soul. "Ahhhh...." His voice quivered. "Yes. Yes, of course. Very efficient of you, I'm sure."

"It was, until *you* showed up and started making trouble." Bella was too busy keeping her righteous indignation at full throttle to give Bixby's odd behavior more than passing notice. "If I weren't here for the Speranza Storm Cosmetics convention, I'd never stay in this exorbitant excuse for a hotel. A midtown Manhattan location is *not* a license for price gouging! Even your so-called group rates are ridiculous. The rooms are tiny, the amenities are pathetic, and the only time anyone takes an interest in a guest's needs is when the guest has absolutely *no* need of — "

That was when the suitcase exploded. Despite Bella's unfailing pressure on the lid, the unhappy bit of baggage abruptly succumbed to the even greater pressure from within. It shot out from under her hands, skidded across the bed, and hit the nearest wall, bursting open like a giant milkweed pod and spraying its contents all over the room. The recoil catapulted Bella to the floor.

Bixby regarded the aftermath of the eruption with a look that was equal parts astonishment and begrudging admiration. His unsettling

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fascination with the coffee maker was gone, blasted to oblivion by the spectacle of what Bella's burst suitcase had unleashed. The first thing he picked up was the hair dryer.

"That's mine!" Bella croaked. Though she was still a little groggy from her recent tumble, her eyes were two slits of steely purpose, focused on the appliance dangling in Bixby's grasp.

"Ma'am, you must be mistaken." He spoke calmly but firmly. "As you can see, this one has the hotel name clearly marked on the handle. Now, as for the soap dish — " He poked the toe of his perfectly shined Oxford at the aforementioned bathroom accessory where it lay half-hidden under a flutter of hotel stationery.

"Don't you *dare* go through my personal belongings!" Bella clawed her way up the side of the bed. As she gained the summit, her fingers closed upon a little bottle of shampoo, one of about three dozen scattered over the sheets of the unmade bed. (It would stay unmade, in its present condition: The blanket and duvet were across the room, spilling out of the suitcase.) "I suppose now you're going to claim that after the price I've paid to lease this dump, I can't have *this*?" She waved the bottle at Bixby.

"Ms. Franklin," he said, attempting to pour laudanum on troubled waters. "Ms. Franklin, ma'am, I believe we are both the victims of an innocent misunderstanding as to, er, boundaries. *Small* items that are not reusable, such as soaps and such, are yours to keep with our compliments, although we do prefer you take only the ones left in your room." He eyed the strewn trove of mouthwash, bath gel, body lotion, and hair conditioner and murmured, "So that's why we found the maid's cart stripped bare." Then, aloud: "As for larger things such as *this*...." Holding the hair dryer with one hand, he plucked a plush hotel bathrobe from the wreckage with the other. "They're not yours for the taking."

With a sound midway between a growl and a whimper, Bella flung herself at the bathrobe and tore it from Bixby's grasp. "That's *mine*," she said. "I brought it with me."

Bixby took a deep, centering breath. "Ma'am, perhaps you've *confused* this robe with your own. Look here." He reclaimed one corner of the disputed garment so that Bella had no choice but to see the hotel's embroidered logo.

"I bought this robe the last time I stayed here!" Bella maintained.

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"I've never been so insulted in all my life. Get out of my room this instant, before I call the police!"

"By all means, ma'am," Bixby replied. His voice had lost its softness. "I have — " a garden of perspiration blossomed all over his face " — other obligations at this hour. Pressing ones. It is almost ten o'clock. That hour is sacrosanct to me, and I will settle this business with you by then, one way or another. Call the police. And the sooner, the better."

"You've got your nerve," Bella said, but made no move toward the phone.

Bixby permitted himself a brief smile. "Ma'am, I am not your enemy. I agree that hotel prices in New York City *are* rather high, that frugality is a virtue, and that your blind determination to get full value for money spent is admirable, in its own way. However, when misguided frugality oversteps the bounds — "

Bella laid one hand to her bosom. "Oh my God, you're calling me a *thief!* You're saying I stole from this glorified flop-house when all I did was take a few teensy little *legal* freebies." She pointed at her ruptured luggage. The tray that had once reposed under the ice bucket peeked out from beneath the purloined duvet. A matched set of four drinking glasses glinted from their towel-swathed safety inside the ice bucket (tongs included) formerly located atop the mini-bar.

"No *decent* hotel would think twice about something this trivial," she went on. "At these prices you should be giving me free spa treatments, not false accusations. It's slander! Libel! I'll sue you until you're blue in the face! I'll — " She paused abruptly and gave Bixby a look of deep puzzlement. Her wrath dropped away, replaced by genuine concern as she asked: "Pardon me, but did you know that you *are* blue in the face? Blue-gray, actually, but — "

An alarm went off in Bixby's pants. It was his cell phone, chiming the hour of ten. "Curse you, you froth-mouthed wench!" he roared. His abrupt transformation from hotel hireling to slate-faced madman made Bella yelp. "Your endless babblings have undone me! By the blesséd Mill, the Holy Hour is upon me, and no hope at all of succor unless I find — "

He paused in midrant. His nostrils twitched. His frantic eyes swept the room, alighting once more on the little coffee maker. He took one unsteady step toward it, reaching out like Galahad vouchsafed a vision of the Grail.

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"Ma'am," he said in a tremulous voice. "Ma'am, forgive my outburst. I — I assure you, all will be well if you will only give me permission to have — to have just one — just one small cup of — "

Bella's gaze followed Bixby's own to the object of his desire. "Coffee?" she said, puzzled at the fuss. With brisk competence she strode over to the carafe, filled the one hotel mug not residing in the wreckage of her suitcase, and thrust it upon him.

Bixby raised the cup with shaking hands that had begun to go ashen and gnarled. A general air of gauntness was slowly creeping over his entire body, but as soon as he downed the first sip, his skin regained its rosy radiance, flesh again amply padded his bones, the shakes fled from his limbs, and a smile of pure contentment lit his face.

Then he took the second sip, and a look of utter horror overcame him. "This — this isn't — *this isn't Tiernan House Blend!*"

Bella rolled her eyes and yanked a handful of brewing packets out of the pockets of the almost-purloined robe. "I suppose you're going to tell me that I can't take the coffee with me, either?"

"If those are *our* complimentary coffee packets, then what in the name of the blesséd Mill did I just drink?" Bixby cried.

"*My* coffee. I always bring a couple of extra packs with me, older stuff I picked up on other trips. Trips when I stayed at *good* hotels," Bella added, unable to resist getting in a jab.

Bixby was beyond insults. He had the look of a man steeped neck-deep in Fate. Dismay died, resignation remained, together with the noble resolution to make the best of a god-awful situation. He ceremoniously raised the mug to his lips and drained it dry. He then fell to one knee and offered up the empty cup to Bella.

"Hey, if you want a refill, get it yourself. I'm not your servant!"

"Nay, but I am yours. For behold, you have brought me the sacred brew out of your own possession and stores, and of my own free will have I drunk it. Thus have I wiped out all past allegiances cemented by this selfsame sacred beverage. For in sooth, just as the used grounds, of hallowed memory, are cast away when their purpose is done, so too does each fresh brewing renew and remake all the bonds that unite master with — "

"If I give you more coffee, will you shut up?" Bella cut in.

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Bixby raised his eyes to hers. "I will do more than that, milady, if that is what you want."

"What I *want*," Bella said harshly, "is to be out of this loony bin, back in my own home, with no more stupid hassles about a few eensy-weensy, *legitimate* souvenirs." She spread her hands, indicating the filched flotsam that had spurted from her valise.

Bixby sprang to his feet, tugged his forelock, and said, "At your service, milady." With that, he scurried to the broken suitcase and fixed it in a breath, using two paperclips and a keychain. He then repacked it quickly and skillfully, even prying two framed art prints off the wall and adding them to the plunder.

Bella gaped as Bixby shut the suitcase. It wasn't so much that he got it to close with all that swag inside, but *how* he closed it: No-hands. All he used was an alien word of power and a snap of his well-manicured fingers. "What did you — ? How did you — ? Did I just see — ? Am I going nuts or what?"

"Nay, milady, you are not mad; I swear it by the blesséd Mill which grinds the beans of bliss exceeding small." Bixby was back on one knee again, his head bowed low. When he lifted it, his face had changed from that of a middle-aged man to something out of the Middle Ages, no man by any means. Such a face belonged outside a great cathedral, with a rainspout in its mouth. Bella took one look at Bixby's cloud-gray skin and grotesque features — goggling eyes worthy of a purebred Boston bull-terrier, lips that stretched from ear to pointed, flapping ear, a nose like a healthy young eggplant — and exclaimed, "What the hell are you?"

"Your humble and obedient servant, milady," Bixby replied. "A brownie by birth and breeding, and entirely at your command. Speak, and if my small magics or my strong arms can fulfill your desires, it shall be done."

To Bella's knowledge, brownies were either pastries or troops of cookie-flogging pipsqueaks, but she was a quick study. "Does that mean I get three wishes?"

"I'm no genie, milady," Bixby replied with a shake of his head. "We brownies are domestic sprites whose powers are limited solely to keeping our masters' homes and hearths in good working order."

"If you're a house-thingie, what are you doing in a hotel?"

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"Ah, my lady is as wise as she is...interesting looking," Bixby said. "In days of yore, in the Old Country, the family Tiernan ran an inn out of their own home, as was the custom. They were good folk, and wise as well in the ways of the Little People. They knew enough to court our favor with a saucer of milk on the doorstep and the occasional barrel of beer set out on Midsummer's Eve.

"But times do change, if loyalties do not, and when the last of the Tiernan deserted the Old Country for these shores, swearing to open an inn in the New World, we could not bear to be parted from him."

"More like you couldn't bear to be parted from the free beer," Bella remarked.

Bixby shrugged shoulders as curved as the side of an earthenware pot. "If only our bond to the Tiernan had been limited to beer! But once in this land, the world turned upside-down. One night, a mere two hundred years ago, our master was moved to sit upon his doorsill with a cup of the sacred brew in his hands. In an absent-minded moment, he left it there when he went in to bed, and there, alas, we found it." Bixby sighed.

"Wait a minute," Bella held up one finger. "Are you telling me that you got hooked on coffee after *one* cup?"

"One sip," Bixby corrected her. "I was not the only one to whom our master owed the bond of nightly tribute. We all of us partook, and so became enslaved to the sacred brew."

"All? How many of you little buggers are there?" Bella asked. Bixby said a number. "*That* many? Jesus."

"Of course I am counting the staff in all the hotels in the Tiernan Group chain," the brownie clarified. "For in time, our master's business thrived, growing from a simple wayside inn to a lodging empire."

"All for the price of a cup of coffee per worker per day?"

"Well, we prefer cinnamon lattés. And a nice piece of cherry danish now and then never killed anyone, but the sacred brew is enough to retain our services."

"Now *that's* what I call getting value for money." Bella glowered at the brownie. "You'd think those Tiernan Group greedheads would pass the savings on to the guest, or at least not make such a stink when a poor, hard-working woman takes one or two insignificant little items from one of these overpriced broom closets."

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"As milady says." Bixby fell naturally into his the-provider-of-the-affeine-is-always-right mindset with his new mistress. "Shame to the ierman! Hail to the Franklin!" He leaped to his feet and swept Bella's ulging suitcase onto his shoulder as if it weighed no more than a used tea ag. "Shall we go?"

"Not so fast," Bella said. "I've got to get dressed first. *And* pay that niserably inflated bill." She gave him a cunning look. "I don't suppose ou can make it go bye-bye?"

Bixby hung his head. "Alas, the workings within these walls are no onger within the scope of my powers to affect."

"Damn. Well, tell you what: You go let your boss know that you're orking for me now while I get dressed, pay the bill, and — "

"There will be no need for me to give notice, milady," Bixby said. He witched, and his otherworldly appearance was once again swallowed up y the rather unglamorous glamour of his chosen human form. "I assure ou, that as a humble brownie, no one will miss me at all."

THOUGH BELLA Franklin possessed the piranha-like ability to strip a hotel room to the bones while simultaneously justifying the garnered loot as "Just getting my money's worth," her own apartment suffered or want of similar minimalizing treatment. It was an Aladdin's cave of lutter, showcasing some of Bella's prouder trophies from previous Speranza torm conventions. Notepads, pens, coffee mugs, and assorted décor ccessories including that endangered species, the ashtray, littered all vailable surfaces. Plates, cutlery, and mini-ketchups from ransacked oom service trays crammed the kitchen. Home goods liberally decked ith the logos of every major lodging chain in the United States were verywhere.

All of that changed once Bixby arrived. The first thing he did was to hed his human glamour. The second was to junk all hotel-plundered oiletries whose seniority had become gloppy senility. The third was to do spot of Dumpster-diving to retrieve what he'd trashed after Bella yowled hat he was trying to reduce her to penury by throwing away decade-old hampoo. The fourth was to stow the remaining clutter, then give the ntire establishment a thorough scrub-up, from floorboards to soffits. All

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this took a week. It would have taken longer if he'd been allowed any downtime, but Bella was adamant about getting the full value of his indentured services. She did not permit the harried brownie one moment's rest, save the unavoidable necessity of letting him observe the Holy Hour (or, as mere mortal unbelievers would term it, a daily coffee break). He told her early on that without it, he would die.

"Well, we can't have that," said Bella. "I've hardly begun to get my money's worth out of you."

"Milady is too kind," said Bixby.

On the seventh day, when the brownie looked ready to drop from exhaustion, his new mistress commanded him to change his glamour to her specifications, just for giggles. Soon Bixby stood transformed into a poi-and-passion Romance hero, bronzed body glistening with coconut oil, blue-black hair streaming past his waist, skimpy sarong holding on by a literal thread, and one hibiscus blossom for garnish. Bella was still licking her lips in approval when there came a knock on the door.

"That had better not be old Mrs. Kenmore from across the hall," she muttered. She opened the door with a loud, "No, you can*not* borrow a cup of sugar!" but instead of finding that aged pest dithering on the doormat she confronted a quartet of uninvited callers.

Radiating suspicion, Bella frowned at the two women in their cheap cotton dresses, the two men in their white, short-sleeved shirts and plain black trousers. "What do *you* want?" she demanded.

"Bixby, ma'am." The reply came in four-part harmony, as if it were the most natural request in the world.

"Bix — I don't know what you're talking about," Bella said quickly.

"The hell you don't!" the smaller woman snapped.

"Selina, such language!" The other female clapped her hands to her ears.

"Ahhh, get over it, Mel," Selina replied. "We didn't come here to play pattycake with this brownie-stealing bimbo." She scowled at Bella. "We watched the hotel surveillance tapes so we know he left with you. Cough 'im up, Toots!"

"Sorry, not interested, got all the crazy I need, 'bye now." Bella shut the door swiftly, only to be thwarted by a size 14-EEEE foot wedged between the panel and the jamb. Naturally enough, it belonged to the

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bigger of the two men. She gave him an icy look. "All right, what are you?"

The shorter man stepped forward. "Good day to you, ma'am. My name is Berry, and these are my friends and associates, Tom, Selina, and Melusine."

"I didn't ask *who* you were," Bella replied tartly. "I asked *what*. I know all about the *special* staffing arrangements at Tiernan House hotels."

"Do you, now." Berry's pleasant smile turned sour. "Ma'am, we'd be happy to remove our glamours. We're not ashamed of our natural forms. However, your neighbors might not react well to seeing us as we are. May we come in? Merely to talk, I assure you. We'll do you no harm. You have my oath as an engineer." Berry snapped his fingers and an ancient slide-rule appeared in his hand. He kissed it reverently before banishing it to realms invisible.

"Just a second." Bella ducked back inside her apartment for a moment. "Swear on *this* and I'll believe you." She held out a small electric coffee bean grinder.

The four exchanged a look of wide-eyed apprehension. In a faltering voice, Melusine asked, "How did you know about the blesséd — the blesséd — ?"

"The blesséd Mill?" Bella chuckled. "I'm a fast learner and Bixby's a good teacher. Swear on it, or stay in the hall."

The larger man scowled. "Can't say as I favor yer attitude," he said. "Like my old Dad used to say t' me, he'd say, 'Tom, seeing as how we're trolls, Bad Attitude's kinda Standard Optivating Proceed-thingie for us. But that's no reason you got to take it from a dab o' mortal meat you can smash into paste 'thout a second thought, mostly cause us trolls got enough trouble layin' hands on a *first* thought.' Good ol' Dad!"

With that, Tom dropped the glamour upon him and stood revealed in all his monstrous glory. His street clothes vanished. Every hulking muscle, wart, and tusk, every talon and square inch of skin the color of a lichen-crusted boulder, all blossomed on Bella Franklin's doorstep, topped by a spiffy blue cap embroidered with the words HOTEL SECURITY. A monumental roar broke from his leathery lips. It shook the floor, curled and crispy-fried the edges of the cheap hallway carpeting, and brought down a shower of plaster from the ceiling.

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It also fetched Mrs. Kenmore from across the hall. The old lady took one look at Tom in his natural state, squealed like a mouse in a hamburger press, and slammed the door hard enough to cause a second blizzard of plaster flakes.

Bella clucked her tongue. "*Now* look what you did." Unfazed by the troll, she turned her head and called over one shoulder: "Hey, Bixby! I've got another job for you."

The sarong-clad brownie appeared at Bella's side before the last word left her lips. He dragged himself past the four visitors without so much as a nod to any of them, including the fully manifested troll, and set his hand-held vacuum cleaner to work on the fallen plaster.

"Bixby!" Berry exclaimed over the roar of the motor. "Don't you know us?"

Bixby snapped off the vacuum and turned his head slowly. "Of course I do. Very kind of you to come seeking me, my dear comrades, but I'm afraid it's no use. She's laid the bond of bean and brew upon me. I am hers." He finished the job and mumbled a feeble "Aloha," as he shuffled back into the apartment. The four visitors watched his broken-spirited retreat with grave dismay. Tom the troll sniffled mightily as tears of sympathy streamed down his craggy cheeks, and he blew his nose in his Hotel Security guard cap.

"Let'm go!" he cried, shaking one boulder of a fist under Bella's nose. "Let'm go now, or else I'll — I'll — I'll pop you a good 'un!"

Bella grinned. "What, not grind my bones to make your bread? As if you could do either! Save your threats, lummox. I've only been toying with you. I know you needn't swear an oath on this thing — " she waggled the coffee grinder in the troll's face. " — to ensure my safety. The holy rule of hospitality forbids a host from ever doing harm to his guest. Well, *I* was a guest of House Tiernan — at obscenely high prices, might I add — and since I paid my hotel bill in full, *none* of you can lay one grubby finger on me."

Berry sighed. "More of Bixby's teachings, ma'am?"

"Exactly. So, now that we all know where we stand — " She stepped farther back into the apartment and made a highly sarcastic bow. " — care to come in?"

The four trooped into Bella's apartment in hangdog single file. Tom

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remained trollish, and the rest cast away their mortal glamours at the threshold, like so many overcoats. Berry the self-confessed engineer shrank by about a foot, becoming a burly dwarf, though dressed more in keeping with the boardroom than the whole woodland cottage/underground kingdom/dig-dig-dig-heigh-ho hoo-hah. Only a mustard yellow pocket protector took his ensemble from chic to geek. He clambered onto Bella's sofa with some effort, sparing Tom a cautionary word *not* to sit on anything, lest it be smashed to tinder.

Sharp-tongued Selina shrank even more than Berry, down to the size of a sparrow. She buzzed under Bella's nose on lacy pink wings and left a sparkling contrail in her wake. Bella licked her lips and tasted confectioner's sugar, which made sense in view of the pixie's minuscule chef's tunic and *toque blanche*. Selina alit on the lip of a garishly painted vase, booty from Bella's one hotel stay south of the border, and idly twiddled a needle-sized wooden spoon.

As for Melusine, her dowdy dress became a clean, utilitarian pair of overalls girdled by a well-appointed tool belt. She patted one of the wrenches fondly with a webbed hand the color of ripe honeydew melon.

Bella's gimlet eyes zeroed in on the rosy frill of external gills framing Melusine's serene face. "Hey, little mermaid, where's your fishtail?"

Melusine blushed pale mint. "Oh, I'm no mermaid, ma'am. I tend to the Hotel Tiernan's plumbing, and I couldn't do that from a fish tank. I'm an ondine." Bella gave her a blank stare, so she added, "A water-sprite." This only evoked further visual *Variations in the Key of D'uh*. "I'm kith and kin to nixies and naiads and — and — Oh, hang it all." Mel slumped in one of Bella's tatty armchairs, fiercely muttering, "Bloody mythological illiterate."

"I suppose it's no use offering you coffee?" Bella's smug, too-sweet question was a taunt, not a proposal of hospitality.

Selina the pixie made a gesture as rude as it was nigh imperceptible, but Berry simply said, "Tea will be fine, ma'am. Herbal, please. Very good of you to go to the trouble."

"Oh, it's no trouble for *me*." Bella barked orders into the kitchen where the captive brownie languished. While Bixby brewed and served some prime chamomile (hand-picked in Massachusetts, hand-swiped from the Sheraton in Boston), Bella told her callers, "Now, listen up, you

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refugees from *Better Gnomes and Gardens*, once that tea's ready, you've got ten minutes to drink up and get out. If you've got anything to say to me, say it now."

"Ma'am, as you know, we've come for our comrade," Berry said calmly.

"And as *you* know, fat chance," Bella returned. "This is the best freebie I ever brought home from a hotel stay, and that's a fact."

"Y'know, ma'am," Tom the troll said in his gritty voice. "If you c'n see fit t' let Bixby go, outer th' kindness o' yer heart, we'd be more'n willin' t' pervide th' selfsame services fer you as he's incumbently doin' 'round this place. We'd come by twice weekly, reg'lar as th' Holy Hour, and tidy yer home up a treat. I might not look it, but I've a good paw fer wipin' winders."

"Wiping *out* windows, you mean," Selina said. Melusine shushed her.

Bella curled her lip. "Twice weekly cleaning? Instead of household chores done twenty-four seven by someone at my beck and call? I don't *think* so."

"Please, ma'am, have pity," Mel implored. "If Bixby's kept apart from his Seelie kinfolk for too long, he'll waste away."

"He's related to seals?"

"Not seals, but the Seelie," Mel said, and ran right back into Bella's amassed lifetime ignorance, head first. But the plucky ondine was nothing if not a tryer. "The Fair Folk. The Little People. The Fey, the Good Neighbors, the Hidden Helpers, the Underhill Posse, the Goblin Marketeers, the — "

"Hey, think Santa's friggin' elves, okay?" Selina broke in before poor Mel burst a water vessel in frustration.

Bella was enlightened but unmoved. "What's that to me?"

"Nothing, apparently," Berry said dryly. "Ma'am, in all my life as a dwarf and an engineer, I've run into some tough problems, but you make building the Hoover Dam look easy as letting two beavers loose at a Christmas tree farm."

"Spare me your beavers," Bella said. "I'm willing to bet you your weight in pure Kona coffee that you've got some completely self-serving reason for coming to Bixby's rescue. Nobody does good deeds for nothing, not in this world. I wasn't born yesterday."

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"I'll say you weren't," Selina declared cheerfully.

"Ma'am, if that's what you believe, I pity you," Berry said. "No wonder you cram your sorry little life with hotel freebies. It's empty otherwise."

Bella laughed so hard she spritzed Tom with tea. While the troll dabbed at his dripping face with a tissue (from a box Bella had wrested out of the wall dispenser at a Hilton in Baltimore), she subjected Berry to a double helping of scorn. "Oh, that's rich! I'll tell you what, you sanctimonious twerp, how about a little wager?"

She fetched a bag of whole-bean Jamaica Blue Mountain from the kitchen and slapped it down, appropriately enough, on the coffee table. "See this? I didn't take it from any hotel, motel, or bed-and-breakfast in existence. It's *mine*. I bought it with my own hard-earned money, and at the price that money-grubbing grocery store chain charged for it, I had every right to take that double handful of butterscotch drops from the bulk candy bin!"

"Ma'am, if you think we're about to risk our own freedom by drinking a drop of that, you've mistaken us for fools," Berry said solemnly.

"In other words, fat ass!" Selina put in.

"Don'cher mean 'fat *chance*'?" Tom the troll asked, always helpful.

"I call 'em like I see 'em."

Bella ignored the barb. "I don't want you to drink it, I want you to swear on it."

"You're free and easy calling for oaths, ma'am," Berry said, his eyes narrowing. "First on the blesséd Mill, now on the beans of bliss. Don't trifle with our faith for your own amusement."

"Not this time. If you've honestly come to free Bixby just because it's the right thing to do, it honors the sacred ties of friendship, it's all a part of the brotherhood of the seals — "

"The *Seelie!*" Mel shouted.

" — then swear so on these beans and *I* swear I'll let him go, here and now. But if you can't do that, you've got to grant me one wish, something beyond Bixby's powers, something I've always wanted with all my heart."

"A winning personality?" Selina suggested.

"A party, you flying glob of snot," Bella replied coldly. "A *fabulous* party, so I can finally brownnose the top brass at Speranza Storm Cosmetics in

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style. Kissing up to those hairsprayed hags is the only way to get ahead in this business, the straight road to earning all the top salesmanship awards, the cruises, the cars — "

"The ultimate freebies," Mel murmured, demurely eyeing the droplets of anticipatory drool forming at the corners of Bella's mouth.

"I'd think a salesmanship award was based on merit alone," Berry remarked.

Bella sniffed. "Shows what you know, Peewee. It's a hard world, and the only way to get ahead is to take what you can, help yourself, and above all...*think fast!*" She hardballed the bag of coffee beans right at the dwarf's face. Mel gave a cry of alarm, but before Berry's nose met a dark-roasted doom, his hand shot up instinctively and intercepted the missile. Bella did her impression of a cream-stuffed cat. "The consecrated caffeine's in your court now, big boy, so how's about that oath?"

"I am an engineer. I do not fear truth, merely statistics." Berry cradled the coffee reverently in his cupped palms. "By all we hold most dear, I freely swear that we've come to rescue Bixby out of purest friendship."

"Oh." Bella had the stricken look of someone who'd not only backed the wrong horse, but had done so at a dog race.

"And also because if we don't get him back for our weekly poker game soon, we'll have to replace him with *Lyndon*." The dwarf shuddered.

"Lyndon?" Bella echoed.

"Lyndon the ogre," Tom volunteered.

"Lyndon the blood-drinking, bone-crunching, flesh-rending, lousy poker-playing, sore-losing, vicious-tempered, troll-punching, dwarf-crushing, ondine-squishing, pixie-swatting ogre," Selina elaborated.

"The designer from the independent florist shop in the lobby, yes, *that* Lyndon," Berry said. "Our poker game is the envy of all the other hotel employees, both for the camaraderie and the chance to pick up some serious winnings."

"Like Bixby was doing for the past six weeks before you captured him," Selina said hotly. "The son-of-a-kobold was *way* ahead, and we all want the chance to win some of our own back."

"Ahead by how much?" Bella asked.

"Coupla thou'."

"Mmmm, big money." Bella was impressed.

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"Not money. Starbucks gift cards."

"Our co-workers know we play honestly, no magic-enhanced cheating allowed, and they don't trust one another enough to start up games of their own," Berry said. "They all want in, so we maintain a waiting list, in case one of us should drop out some day, for whatever reason. Lyndon's name tops that list. One more week without Bixby and we'll have to let him join the game." Berry clasped his sturdy hands around the coffee beans in a gesture of supplication so tight that a third of the bag was rendered into a fine espresso grind. "Ma'am, for the sake of friendship, for the sake of compassion, for the sake of poker, I implore you, let our brownie go!"

"Ask me after my party," said Bella, and burst into cackles of victorious laughter.

BIXBY STOOD BENEATH the familiar green and gold awning that sheltered the main entrance to the Hotel Tiernan, a sheaf of papers in his hands. The doorman on duty was a gnome named Hork. A huge smile broke across his face as he recognized the errant brownie.

"By the blesséd Mill, lad, you don't mean to say you're free again?" he cried, holding the door wide in welcome. "Mel told me of your sorry trials. Ah, dreadful doings, that, just dreadful, but here you are, home again, so all's well that — "

"Shut the door, Hork," Bixby said, glum. "I'm not free, I'm only here to deliver milady's list of demands for the party she's won on a wager. I fear that if I went through those beloved doors, knowing I'll be forced to leave once more, it would break my heart. Be a good bogle and summon one of my poker chums to take this." He rattled the bunch of papers.

Hork set two fingers to his lips and blew a whistle so shrill and commanding that taxis came flocking from blocks away, like seagulls to a garbage barge. The piercing sound also fetched Melusine, lovely in her plumber's uniform. Bixby handed over Bella's list wordlessly and turned to leave.

"Oh, Bixby, I wish there were something we could do to save you!" she called after him.

He paused and looked back. "And what might that be?" he replied.

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The expression of total defeat on his face brought seaweed-steeped tears to the ondine's eyes. "I'm caught fast in the grasp of a greedy mortal with fingers stickier than spiderweb strands. She fancies herself the victim of harsh times, but never once has she shown a wisp of the compassion she demands from the world. She feels no hurts but her own. I'll die in her service, Melusine."

"Bixby, you mustn't talk about such things!"

"What, death? At this point it would, as Clint Eastwood says, make my day." He trudged off.

Mel wiped her eyes, then looked down at the list Bixby had given her. Berry had told Bella Franklin to be specific in her desires for the party, implying that she'd get exactly what she asked for, no more and no less. It wasn't typical behavior for the otherwise generous-souled dwarf, but the mortal creature had gotten his dander up to stratospheric levels. Bella in turn had set her shrewd mind to beating him at his own game. The law profession would never know how much it had lost when Bella Franklin turned to hawking lipsticks instead of litigation. The list of party specs showed the master hand of a highly gifted and vindictive nitpicker. Everything was there, from appetizers and aperitifs to desserts and décor. There was only one thing that she seemed to have missed.

"Stupid dust-muncher really dropped the ball on this," Melusine said to herself. "What a thing to overlook! She knows we're not obliged to include anything left off the list, but I'll bet she'll fly into a snit if *we* don't take care of this. Ah well, it'll be easy enough to fix." Mel pulled out a waterproof pen and scribbled an addendum to the list. "I'll just go visit Lyndon and — "

The ondine stopped short, pen hovering a hair above the page. "Ooooh!" A radiant smile of inspiration lit up her face and she ran a chartreuse tongue over sharp, fishy teeth. She raced back into the Hotel Tiernan so fast that Hork the door-gnome was left puzzling over whether he had or had not actually heard an ondine utter a throaty, gloating, *Mwahahahaha*.

Bella Franklin's party was a small yet sumptuous brunch, the tasteful confines of the Hotel Tiernan's Oberon Suite contrasting nicely with the primped and polished vulgarity of her guests. The higher-ups of Speranza

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Storm Cosmetics crowded around the buffet table as though their lives depended on building up a layer of shrimp-based flesh to see them through the winter. When a waiter emerged from the kitchen with a tray of crab-stuffed mushroom caps, he almost perished in the stampede. The chef manning the prime rib carving station clutched his knife with dew-browed desperation as he begged the ladies to give him a break; he was flinging slabs of dripping red meat onto their plates as fast as he could. High above the guzzling, gulping crowd, Selina hovered unnoticed. The pixie chef had every right to look pleased; she'd outdone herself with this spread. There was even a whole roasted pig up for grabs, complete with obligatory apple-in-mouth and gratuitous tattoo of Bella Franklin's face across the porker's left buttock.

As for the lady thus immortalized, the insult rolled off her like *sauce à l'orange* off a Long Island duckling's back. She leaned against the open bar, sipping a dry martini and surveying the scene. A leer of triumph crawled across her lips as she topped off her glass with the last dribble from the individual cocktail shaker at her elbow. Then, habit being habit, she wrapped the shaker in a napkin and stuffed it into her purse, a be-sequinned behemoth she'd acquired precisely for its stowage capabilities.

"You look happy, milady," Bixby said dully. He was still hermetically sealed in his Hawai'ian hottie glamour, but for tonight he'd been tricked out in a tux.

"And why shouldn't I be?" Bella plucked the bar clean of matchbooks, dropped them into her abyss of a bag, then added two peanut bowls (peanuts included) for good measure. "So far, *six* Speranza Storm vice presidents have made it a point to talk to me. They reeked of free oysters Rockefeller. They'll surely remember my name when it's time to hand out the big rewards at next year's convention."

"Bully for you, milady."

Bella showed her teeth in a panther's smile. "Poor Bixby, *you* don't look happy at all. Maybe a drink would cheer you up." She called for the bartender's attention. "Another dry martini for me and an Irish coffee for my friend over here." She fattened avidly on the light of hope that kindled in Bixby's eyes, then extinguished with a quick, cruel: "*Hold the coffee.*" She patted Bixby's stricken face and cooed, "Tsk, tsk, wasn't that a near thing? You almost got to drink some Tiernan House Blend

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again, and we both know what *that* would do. Lucky I saved you just in time."

"Whatever you say, milady." A lone tear trickled down Bixby's cheek.

Berry and Mel approached the bar, glamoured to the nines as Eurotrash — sleek, chic, bored, and black-clad. "I trust everything is to your liking, ma'am?" the dwarf asked from an unusual (for him) height.

"It'll do," Bella replied languidly. "But whose stupid idea was it to make the centerpieces *that* big?" She gestured at the towering thickets of day lilies, orchids, and roses on every table.

"That would be Lyndon, ma'am," Berry replied. "He likes to think big. It comes naturally to an ogre."

"An ogre who's also one heck of a shrewd businessman," Mel put in.

"What's so shrewd about cramming half a garden onto every table?" Bella's gesture swept the room. "It's wasteful!"

"Not when he can reuse the same arrangements at several events."

"He can?" Berry seemed genuinely surprised by this news.

Mel nodded. "No *shrinkage*, you see. None of the floral arrangements can go walkabout between the one o'clock bridesmaids' luncheon, the four o'clock tea party, and the seven o'clock testimonial dinner. Who'd want to take home something this big? Who *could*?"

"You mean that after *my* party he's going to recycle *my* flowers at someone else's affair?" Bella began to seethe.

"To be honest, ma'am, they're not your flowers." Mel produced Bella's detailed list and handed it back to her. "You'll notice you forgot to specify centerpieces of any sort, big or small. The fact that the Hotel Tiernan provided them anyway — "

"Your halo's in the mail," Bella snapped. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to see to my *invited* guests." She pushed her way past Berry and Melusine, Bixby bobbing in her wake.

Tom the troll lumbered up behind his friends. Like them, he was in human guise. He looked quite dashing in his security guard uniform, and quite ill at ease with the unwanted attention it attracted from the Speranza Storm crowd. "Mind if I stick close t' yer?" he asked, casting nervous glances at the predatory females. "Brrrr! They looks ready t' gobble me up like I was a nighty-night mint onna pillow."

Selina zoomed down from the chandelier to perch on his shoulder.

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"Can't blame 'em if you're irresistible, Tom," she said. "It's those rock-hard abs. Pity the girls don't know they're *real* rocks." She laughed so hard that she fell into the troll's ear.

"Selina!" Without pausing to think what such a spectacle must look like to the casual observer, Berry stuck two fingers into Tom's ear and saved the pixie from a waxy fate. "Burnt beans, look at the mess you — "

"*Eeeeeuuuuwwwww!*" The shriek of utter horror and disgust that burst from the throat of the Speranza Storm bigwig who'd just witnessed Selina's rescue caused every eye in the Oberon Suite to latch onto the four poker buddies. "What *is* that thing?" the woman yowled. "A cockroach? Stuck in his *ear*?"

"Hey! I'm no cockroach!" The very idea infuriated Selina beyond all measure. Her tiny wings vibrated with such violence that all traces of her recent sojourn down Tom's ear canal liquefied and were flung everywhere. More of the women squealed in revulsion as droplets of trollish ear wax spattered their best polyester bib and tucker. They fled the party *en masse*. In less than a minute, the only sign that the room had once been packed with women was a scattering of peel-and-gorge shrimp carapaces, the skid pattern of high heel marks on the parquet, and the cloud of excess eye shadow and blusher slowly settling over the abandoned tables.

"Whoa," the pixie remarked, scanning the echoing, evacuated space. "What crawled up *their* bloomers?"

"You...*monsters!* Look what you did to my party!" Bella Franklin sailed across the floor, her rage leaving Bixby abandoned on the far side of the room. "Is *this* how you honor your bets?"

"Ma'am, the wager specified only that we'd give you a party," Berry said.

"There wasn't one word uttered about how long it had to last," Mel added, her words all the more aggravating because they were true.

Bella was in no mood for logic. She roared an obscenity and slapped Berry and Mel across their faces before they could react. Selina was quicker and easily soared out of the maddened mortal's reach. Bella cursed the elusive pixie and turned on Tom in her frustration. A howl of pain followed the hearty smack she dealt across the troll's chops. It did *not* come from him.

"Bloody mythological illiterate," Mel said again, this time with a smile. "*Some* people know that trolls are made of stone."

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"You *ruined* me!" Bella shouted, tenderly holding her injured hand. "You humiliated me in front of every Speranza Storm V.I.P. in existence! Do you know who *first* saw that miserable cockroach?"

"Hey!" Selina objected from on high.

"Only the *president* of Speranza Storm Cosmetics, that's all. You destroyed my future! I'll *kill* you!"

"Beggin' yer pardon, ma'am," Tom said. "But I'd like t' see yer try."

Bella gritted her teeth. "Oh, you'll see. When I get home, I'm working your pal Bixby to death, once and for all! It won't take long. Not once I revoke his percolator privileges."

The four friends gasped. "Ma'am, you can't mean it!" Melusine cried. "To keep him from the sacred brew is unbelievable cruelty, even for a mortal."

"Also, real stupid," Selina put in from on high. "If you whack Bixby, there goes your housekeeping slave."

"I survived without him before," Bella retorted. "It'll be worth it."

"Ma'am, I beg of you, *think*," Berry said. "We'll mourn Bixby's loss, but it won't kill us."

"It won't. Lyndon the ogre will." Bella leered nastily through the pain from her self-mangled hand. "Lyndon the troll-punching, dwarf-crushing, ondine-squishing, pixie-swatting, *sore loser* ogre. Think I wasn't paying attention? With Bixby dead, you'll have to bring him into the game right away, and then you'll either have to let him win every hand or face a world of hurt. You'll end up broke or broken, I don't care which. Maybe he won't kill you outright, but you'll wish you were dead." She turned her back on them and bellowed, "Bixby!" The brownie came running. "We're going home. Say goodbye."

"Yes, milady," Bixby replied sadly. "Farewell, Tom, Selina, Melusi — "

"*Not* farewell," Bella interrupted. "*Goodbye.*" Her smirk was pitiless. She headed for the door without a backward glance. She knew Bixby had no choice save to follow her, even to his death. She only paused long enough to scoop up one of the towering centerpieces and stuff it partway into her purse. It must have been agony to accomplish with her wounded hand, but as always, greed overruled every other aspect of Bella Franklin's life.

"Ma'am, you can't take that. It doesn't belong to — " Berry began.

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"After all I spent to stay in this fleabag, it damn well *should*," Bella shot back, and stalked out of the Oberon Suite, slamming the door behind herself and Bixby.

THE REVERBERATIONS were still fading when Berry, Tom, Melusine, and Selina ditched their expressions of shock in favor of wicked smiles. "Nicely coordinated, friends," Berry declared. He flipped open his cell phone and turned to Mel. "Now?"

"Now."

The dwarf hit a number on his speed dial and spoke a few choice words. Within the space of two heartbeats, the peace of the Hotel Tiernan was shattered by a gut-knotting shriek of pain and terror. Then there was silence, soon followed by the sound of heavy, ominous footsteps approaching the closed door of the Oberon Suite.

With a thunderous kick that sent the door flying across the room, Lyndon the ogre made his entrance. One massive paw held the floral arrangement that had left the premises in Bella Franklin's swag-engulfing handbag. He replaced it carefully on its table and left without a word, nonchalantly picking some stringy, sticky, crimson bits out of his fangs. Bixby sidled in just under the departing ogre's elbow, his mortal glamour gone, his whole body shivering with distress.

"He ate — he ate — *he ate her!*" the brownie cried, with a fearful backward glance at Lyndon's retreating form.

"Well, I should hope so," Mel said. "That *was* the plan."

"Praise the blessèd Mill, it worked." Berry dabbed his brow with a wadded pocket handkerchief. "If the Franklin woman hadn't taken those flowers — "

"Pass up a freebie like that? *Her*?" Mel waved one hand in a cavalier manner. "It was only a matter of *when* she'd rise to the bait, not *if*. And believe me, I know bait. Personally."

"But how could he *do* it?" Bixby protested. "How could he harm a guest? The bond of hospitality — "

" — does not apply to the florist shop, unless the guest has actually purchased flowers," Berry said.

"Lyndon has certain standards, for an ogre," Mel added. "One of them

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is zero tolerance for petty filchery, especially when he needs every last one of these arrangements for the Siegelman *bar mitzvah* later today."

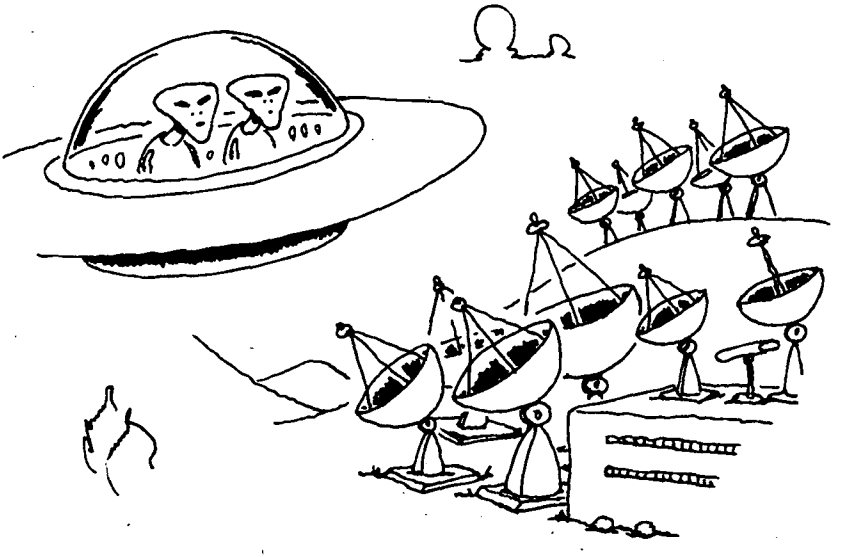
"*Mazel tov!*" Selina concluded. She clapped her hands and a goblin busboy appeared, bearing a tray laden with a steaming coffee pot, four cups, and a thimble for the pixie. "Tiernan House Blend," she announced gleefully as her minion pressed a filled cup into Bixby's hands, then served the others. "Welcome home!"

Bixby gratefully gulped the brew that renewed the ancient tie, then took a deep breath and said, "My dear friends, how can I ever thank you?"

"Try losing a hand now and then," Selina proposed.

"Or just thank Melusine," Berry said. "This was all her idea."

"Don't mention it." The ondine gave Bixby a warm, somewhat damp hug. "Hey, coffee and a free brownie? There are worse ways to start the day."



"I would contact them if they didn't seem so needy."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Worshipping Small Gods, by Richard Parks, Prime Books, 2007, $14.95.

Hereafter, and After, by Richard Parks, PS Publishing, 2007, $18.

BACK IN a 2002 installment of this column, in a review of Richard Parks's *The Ogre's Wife, and Other Fairy Tales for Grown-Ups* (Obscura Press), I made mention of how I was unfamiliar with Parks's byline and was therefore a little surprised to realize that I'd already read most of the stories in *The Ogre's Wife* in their initial magazine publications.

I still have trouble retaining the names of authors in anthologies and magazines, but I remember Parks now — his is now one of the bylines I look for on a contents page — and this time I was expecting to be familiar with the stories collected in *Worshipping Small Gods*. I look for his stories because, since I've managed to imprint his name on my memory, I also remember that he's one of my favorite short form writers working today. While I never know what to expect when I start a story of his, I do know it will be good. And worth rereading.

That's certainly the case here with eleven old favorites and three new ones, two of which feature his continuing character, the ghost hunter Eli Mothersbaugh. The pair are set in a near-future world where science has perfected a machine (the sensic) that allows one to record ghosts digitally. Eli's job is to differentiate between actual ghosts and simple bioremnant energies (sort of like an energy "recording" that repeats in a loop), and then try to free the souls so that they can move on.

The stories feature the ghosts of an opera diva ("Diva") and a collector of Japanese woodblock prints ("Hanagan's Kiyomatsu, 1923"), but they're not really about ghosts or the science that lets one record

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them. They're not really about the mysteries that lie at the heart of the hauntings, either — though all of that comes into play. Like the other two stories featuring Eli that appear in this collection, what they're really about are the living people left behind: the haunted.

Because this is where Parks excels. No matter how outlandish the setting of the story, or how *other* from us his characters appear (in additional stories, he regularly features gods, denizens of fairy tales and legends, and every sort of strange protagonist), Parks always manages to convince us of the humanity that lies at their hearts and has us care for them.

He's also a bit of a jack-of-all-trades when it comes to style, but he writes so credibly, in so many different kinds of stories, that it's a required talent. And whenever I think I prefer one style over another, he nudges me elsewhere.

For instance, I might say that I like his ones that take place in historical or secondary worlds, but I think he really shines when he brings the mythic elements into the contemporary world and then explores how ordinary people deal with the sudden appearance of the impossible in their lives (as he does in the collection's other new story, "The Wizard of Wasted Time.") At least I think they're my favorites until I read something like "Kallisti," the opening salvo in *Worshipping Small Gods*, and find myself enamored with how effortlessly Parks puts a contemporary spin on the "true story" behind the events that led to the Trojan War. Or one of the Eli Mothersbaugh stories. Or one featuring Japanese fox spirits ("Fox Trails").

I'd say there's something for everyone here, but really, I think everyone will enjoy all of these stories, even if you think you wouldn't. Parks is a perfect example of a multifaceted writer who can't — and shouldn't — be bound by anyone's idea of who he is. Instead, we should appreciate the diversity and skill he brings to the page and just be glad that there still are writers who have so many different things to say, with so many unexpected settings and characters.

There's also a hardcover edition available of *Worshipping Small Gods* that sells for $29.95.

But now, just to stay with Parks for a moment, I do find myself wondering if he'd still seem so fresh and innovative in a novel, where one needs to pick a style and stick with it at far greater length than a short story.

With PS Publishing's edition of *Hereafter, and After*, we get a taste.

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It's in the novelet/novella range, but it's the longest piece I've seen from Parks to date and it certainly whets my appetite for that as-yet unpublished — perhaps unwritten, perhaps not even started — novel.

Here we meet recently deceased Jake Hallman who, after getting hit by a garbage truck, awakes to find himself in the afterlife on something called the Golden Road. An angel comes to escort him to Heaven, but Hallman has questions, which leads him to have an "insight," which makes him that rare being in the afterlife: a dead person who is capable of change. The dead aren't supposed to change after their death; those who do become free souls.

And that leads Hallman on a stranger journey through the afterlifes of all sorts of myths with only the company of an equally bewildered ex-Valkyrie named Freya for company. All of this allows Parks to poke gentle fun and make some serious commentary on our belief systems, and it gives us a terrific read.

Hereafter, and After is a story that would have made Robert Nathan or James Branch Cabell proud — and probably would James Morrow, too, who's still alive and could read it. And it certainly shows that Parks has the chops to work at a longer length.

There's also a more limited hardcover available for $45. Check the publishers' web sites for ordering information on both these books.

Before we go on to the next review, I should mention that PS Publishing appears to put out their books in quartets. The other worthy titles coming out the same time as the Parks book are: *The Lees of Laughter's End* by Steven Erikson, *The Scalding Rooms* by Conrad Williams, and *The Colorado Kid* by Stephen King.

The latter (reviewed in an earlier installment of this column) makes a welcome hardcover of this paperback original, but it appears in three different versions, each with cover art by a different artist, and each in various editions. All of which seems a bit like overkill, but what do I know?

Well, I know that it's a great story and one of my favorites by King.

Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction, by Jeff Prucher, Oxford University Press, 2007, $29.95

I'm not a professional etymologist by any means, but I do love words, and I love to trace their ori-

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gins. So I was particularly pleased to receive a galley of Jeff Prucher's *Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction*.

Unlike all the other scholarly books on the subject of science fiction, Prucher concentrates on the words and concepts that have become the sf lexicon. It's terrific to browse, full of all sorts of citations of first appearances of words and their subsequent usage, showing how many of the words commonly used today had their origin in our genre — and not hard science as one might sometimes suppose. Shuttle, robot, timeline, extraterrestrial, cyberspace...our language is that much richer for the infusion of sf terms.

I often suggest with this sort of a reference book that you should have a look at it in your local public library — and you might still want to do so, just to get an idea of its breadth, depth, and entertainment value. But then you're going to want a copy of your own. I'm off to preorder one for myself as soon as I finish this column.

A Fine and Private Place, by Peter S. Beagle, Tachyon, 2007, $14.95.

Synchronicity's a funny thing. There I was in last month's column, mentioning how this is one of my favorite books, and the next thing I know there's a new reprint of it sitting in my post office box.

Now the fear I always have of going back to something I haven't reread in a long time is that it won't measure up to the warm affection I carry for it in my memories. But happily, that wasn't the case here. I didn't even mean to reread it. I simply thought I'd try a few pages to see how it fared and the next thing I knew it was late at night and I was halfway through.

For those of you new to this classic, it tells the story of a druggist who gave up his profession and moved into a mausoleum in the Bronx's Yorkchester Cemetery. Jonathan Rebeck has lived there for nineteen years when the book opens, his only company a talking raven and the ghosts that haunt the cemetery for a few weeks after their burial. The ghosts start to lose their memories over those weeks and eventually they're gone. But until they go, Rebeck can see and speak with them.

Rebeck is more than content to stay hidden away from the outside world, but the arrival of a certain pair of ghosts and a Jewish mourner seem set to change everything, and we have our story.

A Fine and Private Place is just as wonderful as I remembered it to

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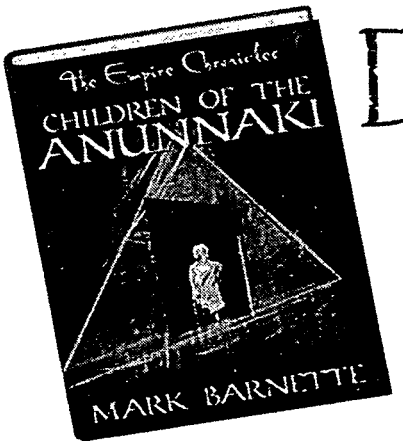

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be: beautifully written, the characters warmly drawn, the pages filled with conversations that run the gamut of the human condition. In these days of everything coming in quick sound bites, at a faster and faster pace, Beagle's novel might seem quaint as it takes its time to tell its story. But you know, there's a reason that people still read Dickens and Austen, and there's a reason they'll appreciate this book: quality counts.

This edition is apparently the definitive text, but I have to admit that whatever small changes Beagle might have made, I didn't notice them. What I do know is that it's a great book, in a lovely affordable package. To give you an example of the attention to detail that everyone involved with this new edition took, cover photographer Ann Monn flew to New York to take a photo in the same cemetery that provided Beagle with his inspiration.

And the book's worth it.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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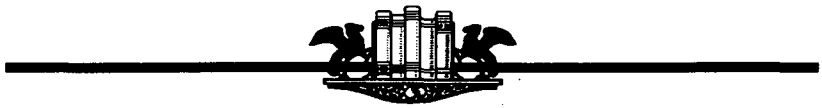

Musing on Books

Michelle West

The New Moon's Arms, by Nalo Hopkinson, Warner Books, 2007, $23.99.

Divergence, by Tony Ballantyne, Bantam, 2007, $6.99.

The Society of S, by Susan Hubbard, Simon and Schuster, 2007, $25.

I'VE LONG been a fan of Nalo Hopkinson, partly because she never does the same thing twice, and partly because, even when the work is flawed, her ambitions — in something as mythically and historically dense as, say, *The Salt Roads* — make her books worth reading. True to form, she's gone from that textual density to something completely different in *The New Moon's Arms*, turning to the Caribbean Island of Dolorosse in the present, and focusing on the middle-aged-and-resenting-it-greatly Calamity Lambkins. Born Chastity Theresa, she changed her name to something she felt was more suitable. Calamity has a daughter, Ifeoma, born when Calamity herself was sixteen years old; she has no husband, and, as the book opens, is burying her father; her mother disappeared one long-ago night when she was young. She is a grandmother as well, a state that she would dislike intensely if she weren't fond of Stanley, although she still hates it when he calls her anything *but* Calamity; Grandma is for *old* women.

When Calamity was a girl, she was a Finder. She could find things that were lost, just by reaching out to touch them. When her mother disappeared, so did the gift, ebbing like the tides around her small island home. But now, late in life, accompanied by hot flashes and chills, that gift has come back with a vengeance. And with a difference: Almost all of the lost things Calamity finds are her own — old books that she loved in childhood, old foods, even the orchard in which

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she grew up. It's not a metaphor that Calamity thinks twice about — but it's particularly apt that she doesn't; she's never been one for questioning her own motives.

But the most important thing she finds is a half-drowned child on the beach — life coming out of the water in the lee of the burial of her father. The child she finds is a boy, age three at best guess; he speaks, but not in any language that she can understand. She suspects he's not entirely human, that he is, in fact, a sea-child, someone who lives, like seals, in the water. She ends up fostering the child — who adores her — and with the child, her own relationship with her daughter comes into focus, on both sides, and she has to take a good, hard look at herself.

Calamity is a brittle, fractious, judgmental, narrow-minded woman — someone who knows how to hold a grudge better than she knows how to breathe. But she is also conversely generous, impulsive, and helpful; when she understands her duty and her obligations, she does her best to live up to them. In short, she's bitingly real, and in spite of the obvious ways in which she's wrong, it's impossible not to like her, even when you're wincing at the latest thing that's fallen out of her mouth. This is one of Hopkinson's gifts — she never argues that Calamity is *right*, but clearly holds her in great affection regardless. You like her, and you want her to move on, to grow, and to let go of the things she holds on to too tightly.

Which makes the novel itself rewarding, because in many ways, it *is* a coming of age — and it doesn't matter that it's middle age; Calamity Lambkins, in spite of herself, has the opportunity to change, to look at her past as an adult, rather than clinging to the ferocious memories of a teenager forced to take on the trappings of adulthood before she'd grown into them. Letting go of pain is hard; understanding the pain you caused while you were *in* pain, possibly harder. She has to do a lot of both.

This is both moving and quiet; it has no end-of-the-world threat, no big pyrotechnics — but the wonder, if quiet, is strong. I highly recommend it.

Tony Ballantyne's second novel is in no way a quiet, small drama. A direct sequel to *Capacity*, it returns us to the world in which Judy lives. Judy, one of thirteen sisters, used to work for Social Care, utilizing the empathy drug MTPH to

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understand better the people she was sent to evaluate and help. That was before Kevin, Chris, and The Watcher, all AIs of incredible intelligence and cunning (although Kevin was in denial), destroyed her life and her simple understanding of the near-perfect world she helped support.

That world has changed markedly with the appearance of Dark Crystals — apparently natural phenomena that feed on, well, intelligence, but Judy's life had already slipped away; she's been in hiding for more than a decade. But hiding time is now over, even in free space, where The Watcher doesn't rule. What rules instead is the Fair Exchange software by which merchant ships of all sizes and categories are making their living.

The book starts out with a very chaotic and largely unhappy vessel, the *Eva Rye*, and its very conflicted crew. The captain of the ship, Michel, doesn't actually want to *be* captain, and in his attempt to please everyone, he succeeds — as is usually the case — in doing pretty much nothing. But the *Eva Rye* stumbles upon a derelict ship, a robot vessel whose AI is asking them for a tow to the nearest space dock because it doesn't want to drift into a floating field of Dark Crystals.

The shipmates argue about this, then vote to use the Fair Exchange Software to trade systems repair (theirs is in need of an overhaul) for the tow.

But the system that the Stranger sees as most in need of repair is actually the crew itself, and in fixing the physical difficulties the ship has, it activates the replication software, and a second *Eva Rye* is born — with less than half the crew. It's the second ship that will eventually accept Judy as cargo.

The crew of the second ship? A caustic, hyper-critical young woman named Saskia, a competent but doubtful young man named Maurice, a severe and somewhat unkind old woman named Miss Rose, and a very severely learning-disabled man named Edward. It's upon these people that Judy's life depends — because they've agreed to take her to Earth, which is heavily quarantined and almost impossible to reach, due to the density of Dark Crystal formations around the planet.

The Fair Exchange software is under some scrutiny; it is certainly not trusted by the crew, because as far as they can tell, they've gotten *nothing* useful for anything they've traded away. But...if you break a deal that the software has calculated *is*

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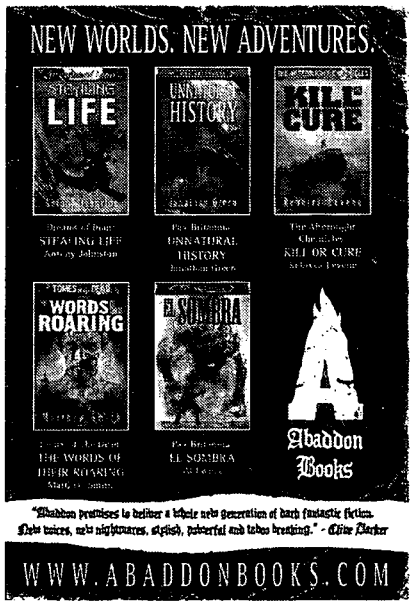
fair, you're out of the FE network for good — and their livelihood, such as it is, depends on that network. So, bitterly unhappy, they soldier on.

Judy herself has discovered that she's not exactly human, which, given everything else, is a blow. She's also discovered that whatever she *is*, DIAMA Corp believes her to be its property, and they've activated a meta-intelligence in her that takes the place of her brother's interior voice. And also takes the place of the empathic MTPH residue that she's grown to depend on to read the emotions of people around her.

She doesn't have to be a genius to figure out this crew — but she's tired, and she knows that no matter what happens, she's headed back to Earth. Everything has transpired to send her back to The Watcher, and Judy is tired of running.

But the Fair Exchange software adds a few twists to the journey itself. And to the book as a whole.

Divergence is an interesting novel; it can be read as an all out space-opera with current technical trends (the proliferation of Von Neumann Machines among them); it can be read as a social commentary on any utopia, and also as a commentary on free will and consequences. Ballantyne never slows down — the book *moves*, and moves with verve and style. I'm not entirely certain I agree with his take on what is, in the end, God — but the book's audacious, unique, and highly readable.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I would like to remind people up front that I don't really go in for Vampire novels. They're just not my sub-genre. (Although I did read all the Marv Wolfman Dracula comics that Marvel put out in my childhood and early youth.) But I have always had luck with those novels

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that skirt the borders of the genre — that are not, in the end, Vampire novels so much as they are novels in which the symbolism of the Vampiric blends with the author's specific voice.

So, with this firmly in mind, I picked up *The Society of S*, by Susan Hubbard. What made me curious was the following, excerpted from the back blurb of the advance reading copy: "a taut, character-driven literary mystery, *The Society of S* is the future of vampirism, told in a voice that will haunt you — and make you think."

I'm all for thinking.

But one of the things that I should *also* have remembered is never to read the PR copy of any book I want to enjoy; I should, by now, know better than to judge a book by any part of its cover, and I cannot now divorce the book and my reading of it from my expectations going into the reading itself.

Perhaps because I was expecting more, I found the book curiously flat. The protagonist-cum-author (the book is, in theory, a diary), one Ariella Montero, was abandoned by her mother at birth; she's been raised entirely by her father, his best friend, his ugly, irritable lab assistant and Mrs. McGarritt, a woman with many children of her own, who comes during the day while her own children are at school to prepare meals for Ariella.

Ariella is, of course, homeschooled by her father, and when the book opens she is thirteen years old, on the brink of adolescence. She has a thousand questions about her mother, which her father has always avoided answering, and is slowly coming up with a thousand questions about her father — and herself. Because Ariella is not, she is coming to realize, normal. And not all of the strangeness can be attributed to her very isolated upbringing.

Mrs. McGarritt does care about her, and is worried about her, and sets in motion a series of events that will change Ari's life pretty much forever: she invites Ari to her home, and introduces Ari to her children. The oldest two, Kathleen and Michael, will become the first real friends Ari has ever had. But Kathleen figures out what Ari is so slow to come to terms with herself.

Possibly my favorite parts of the novel — the ones that feel truest to me, as a reader — are those that involve the growing friendship between Kathleen and Ari, and the growing attraction between

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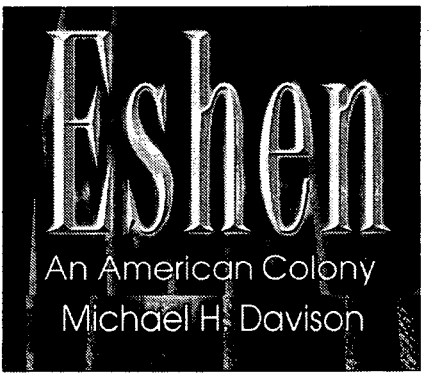
Michael and Ari; there's a real weight to it, and a sense of hope and wonder on the part of the narrator that makes her earlier isolation stand out. True as well is the portrayal of the family when tragedy strikes, and it's haunting — but it's not what the book is actually about, and given the difference in weight between these scenes and the scenes that involve the mystery of Vampirism, the Vampirism is pale and faded.

Ari's response to the tragedy is to run as far away as she can in search of the mother who abandoned her at birth. She finds her mother, and finds her own kind — but again, given the understated complexity of her interactions with the McGarritt children, their reunion is all *too easy*.

Having said all this? I finished the book, and I enjoyed much of it while reading; much of it was very, very strong, as noted above. But it doesn't quite stand alone for me; as a single novel, it doesn't quite gel at the end.



The Esh, native inhabitants of a dark ominous forest on an alien world, terrify humans with an incomprehensible power to paralyze and induce psychosis until one man dares to face that peril and in so doing discovers an astounding truth about himself and all human beings.

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From his home in New Orleans, Albert Cowdrey continues to send us a variety of science fiction and fantasy stories. This month we bring you a sequel to his well-received story from our August 2004 issue, "The Tribes of Bela." After the events of that story, we never expected Colonel Kohn to leave home again, but unfortunately for him (and fortunately for us), he has been called upon once again to investigate....

Murder in the Flying Vatican

By Albert E. Cowdrey

I SWORE I'D NEVER GO INTO space again, not after the last time, not after the bloody events on Planet Bela.

I'd not only promised myself, I'd promised my wife — a much more serious matter. Yet there I was, listening to the hiss of an airlock. In the words of an ancient philosopher, it was déjà vu all over again.

I tried to comfort myself (as I'd tried to comfort her) with the thought that a mere orbital station isn't really *space.* Terra, big and blue and cloud-wreathed, hovered a mere 36,000 and some odd clicks below. And somewhere down there, in the Great American Desert, lay Manypalms Oasis with its new faux-adobe dwellings, its lush parks where retirees practiced tai chi amid flaming clumps of bougainvillea. Beyond it, a sun-shocked moonscape with hills of bare rock named for the animals they're supposed to resemble — the Mountain Lion, the Dromedary.

In my mind's eye I could see Anna hard at work in her clinic, helping those who'd already lived too long live longer yet. I should have been at the Wellness Center nearby, conducting a martial arts class I started to

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help the oldsters keep spry. Ever seen ninety-year-olds smashing bricks with their hands? Makes them feel like they're seventy-five again.

Well, I wouldn't be holding class for a while. I checked my new pocket omni, set it to record everything I heard, and buried it in a coded memory — including my own stream of consciousness, picked up from a chip embedded in my larynx. Then the seal on the airlock's inner door opened with a sigh of compressed air, a chunky hooded figure stepped forward to receive me, and I entered — for the first time ever — a lamasery of the White Monks.

Nothing of the spook's face was visible except a bristly bearded mouth that growled, "Welcome to Heaven's Footstool. Please step through the scanner."

Not at all the smooth, unctuous, clerical sort of voice I'd expected. Glad to hear him talking English, though that was no big surprise. Sure, India and China dominate everything today, but that means they're at loggerheads all the time. So here we are still chattering in English, everybody's second language, which is easier to learn anyway and politically okay because England and America don't amount to much any longer, so nobody feels intimidated by them. Indo-Chinese rivalry is also why the world capital's at New Angkor, sort of midway between the Dragon and the Elephant.

This trivia was drifting through my head (and recording itself in the omni), while I stood gawking at the ancient space station. Impatiently, the monk cleared his throat.

"I took my first trip to Luna from here," I explained. "Almost fifty years ago. In those days it was OS-1. Busy place, with people going into space and coming back, scientists doing astronomy, cosmology, weightless studies — "

"It's different now," he snapped. "The scanner, *please*. Left your gun at home? Good, we don't allow 'em here. Be sure your stickums are tightly laced. Pseudograv generator's practically dead, and you wouldn't want to bounce off the ceiling, eh? Now, look in the little mirror."

He pressed a small oblong white box against my face. I hardly had time to flinch before the expected flash of intense light. While crimson dots spun across my field of vision, the monk read my name, rank, and serial number from the display.

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"Kohn," he muttered. "Robert Rogers. SN 52.452.928. Colonel, Security Forces, Ret. Why'd they haul you out of retirement?"

"Couldn't do without me," I lied.

Actually, HQ didn't want to waste a senior officer — which was what the monks were demanding — on what the cops called "the murder of some piss-ant little spook." I'd gained a kind of ambiguous fame handling offworld homicides during the Bela episode, which — in addition to bringing me and Anna together, and almost costing both of us our lives — also cost me a chunk of my hard-earned pension.

So, speaking religiously, all things worked together for good: HQ offered to reinstate my full pension if I would get the monks — who wield a lot of clout politically and can't be ignored — off their backs. They even supplied me a ride on an official cruiser, instead of making me wait two days and take the regular supply shuttle.

But no need for this spook, who introduced himself as Brother Ion, to know all that background. While he was busy stowing his retinagraph in one of his capacious sleeves, I hit him with a line I've always wanted to use.

"Take me to your Master," I deadpanned.

"Master Po's a hundred and twenty-eight," he answered, apparently seeing nothing funny in my wit. "I spend a lot of my time watching over the old guy. The CM runs day-to-day operations."

"CM?"

"Chief Monk. The Most Reverend Aung Chai. Lemme tell him you're here," he added. He pulled an omni out of the same sleeve — must've had pockets inside, like a kimono — and grunted into it, "Got him." Then held the gadget in front of my face so the boss could see me. "Like the pseudograv," he explained, "the whole damn monitoring system" — he gestured at an antique security camera on one wall — "is down, so we have to use omnis. Let's go."

We set off at almost a run. I gathered without being told that the CM was an impatient man.

You get used to Standard Gravity — Earth standard, I mean. Among other things it gives you hemorrhoids, heart trouble, big muscles and the habit of using them. I was wearing Velcro-soled boots ("stickums") that

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cling to the gray carpeting, but the rest of me bounced up at every step, because I was pushing down too hard. For every action there *is* an equal and opposite reaction, dammit.

I decided to start doing my job, storing away faces and IDs in what was still a trained and ample memory. "Could you dispense with the hood for a second?" I asked Brother Ion. "I like to see who I'm talking to."

"No can do. Regulation Nineteen, 'In public, monks will cover their heads at all times except when eating or performing ablutions.' By the way, I'm not supposed to be talking, either. Regulation Four: 'Except in dire emergencies, all monks will observe the rule of silence from the beginning of Morning Meditation to the close of Great Meditation in the evening.' "

"Isn't murder a dire emergency?"

"For the corpse, yeah. Not for me."

Abruptly he halted at an unmarked door and struck it once with his knuckles. A growl from within, and Ion threw it open."His Reverence, honored Chief Monk Aung Chai," he intoned, in a kind of chant. "Colonel Kohn, Security."

"At least," said a bass voice, "those clowns on Terra sent me a senior officer. *Very* senior. Call the doctor and make Brother Kendo ready to receive guests," he added to Ion, who vanished, the door whispering shut behind him.

"Ion's my seneschal," the CM explained. "Closest thing we have to a cop here. Bit of a thug, I believe, before he got religion. Brother Kendo is the victim."

He leaned over a broad red-lacquered Ming-dynasty table he used for a desk and waved one hand. I sat on a gilded chair facing him. Like all furniture there, it was clamped to the floor, and like all chairs it had a seatbelt that I cinched around my *hara*, or midriff, to keep myself from drifting.

The Chief Monk had his hood pushed back — apparently neither Regulation 19 nor Regulation 4 applied to him — and his face not only grabbed but held my attention. Whatever I expected a Chief Monk to look like, a puma was not on my list. I used to hunt them in the Northern Mountains before I gave up killing except in self defense, and their resemblance to the CM is startling. A long broad nose, a five-day growth

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of ginger whiskers, long sharp teeth, and a pair of dark mesmerizing eyes that didn't appear to blink. Only the round pupils stopped me from thinking that some nutcase scientist had made a chimera while playing with the genes of two species.

Yet I also felt an uneasy sense of kinship. He was about my size and we could've sung a bass duet if anybody ever wrote such a thing. He was clearly of European descent, his English accented from someplace near the North Sea. Adopted his name, I supposed, with a bow to Asia from which the White Monks derive their faith.

A small serving bot with one off wheel wobbled up, asking politely if I wished tea. Very much, said I, and it scooted off about its housewifely duties. The CM sat back, one long arm lying on the desk, the other resting upright on its elbow. He was checking me out, just as I was contemplating him. He fit well into his setting — the Ming desk, the elegantly loomed carpet glued to the deck, the walls hung with antique scrolls. Sung landscapes with beetling cliffs, fathomless valleys, drifting clouds, rushing streams. Souvenirs of the Earth, where people were meant to live. Why was he here? Why was I?

"A guest did it," he said abruptly.

"Pardon?"

"People come up here, lay people. To make a retreat, escape the mindless distractions of worldly life. Recharge their spiritual power packs, so to speak. In addition to our eighty-seven monks, we have at present thirty-three guests. One of them stabbed Brother Kendo. Why, I can't imagine."

The Chief Monk was either genuinely baffled or a very good liar. "He was so *unimportant*," he said.

"What are your guests like?"

"Mostly people of consequence, in worldly terms. The rich and powerful need religion, too. But right now we have one who doesn't fit — just doesn't fit. Don't know what he's doing here. A gladiator, rich but crude, very crude."

A gladiator. Hmm. I used to watch the Absolute Combat shows on telly before Anna made me stop. The eternal appeal of real blood — intermittently of real death. I was beginning to understand why the CM called on Earth Security for help.

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The monks' excellent political connections are, of course, legendary. The Council of State in New Angkor not only gave them this elderly space station free of charge, it made the station legally a sovereign world, even though it depended on Terra for everything from food to, well, detectives. Hence unbelievers' sardonic term for it: the Flying Vatican.

And here, like the bravos in old Roma who served the more murderous impulses of the Renaissance Popes, lived a guest whose profession was death. I figured I might need my martial-arts training before this was over.

"How and when did Brother Kendo die?"

The Chief Monk frowned, rather a fearsome event considering the size and shape of his face. "That question will be answered fully later on. First, however, I've got some things to show you."

When I started to object, he held up a big, dead-white palm. "I have my reasons. You've been seconded to the government here, and I am the government. Under, of course, Master Po. Like it or not, you'll do things my way. And now I imagine the corpse has been removed from the refrigerator and prepared for your inspection. So let's go."

He sprang up with the speed only weightlessness makes possible. The bot reappeared with steaming cups of tea and, robotically, started serving even though we were headed out. I could hear its off wheel squeaking as the door whispered shut behind me.

The CM had maybe thirty years on me and moved at a kind of modified gallop. I followed as best I could, stickums clutching the deck at every step and protesting as I pulled them free.

As we strode along, the structure of the station started coming back to me. Basically it was four concentric wagon wheels connected by nine spokes. Set at the center was a hub (creatively named the Hub), which contained the central control room, mainframe computer and machinery for heating, cooling, water processing and recovery, and so on. Heaven's Footstool hadn't kept its orbit for over two hundred years on sheer inertia; attitude and altitude were constantly being adjusted by plasma jets fired through a couple of hundred vents on the outer hull. The lingo of the place was maritime, I remembered: the floor was always the deck, a wall a bulkhead, the ceiling was I didn't recall what.

This was D Ring, the outermost. We turned from it into Spoke 9 and hastened past C and B Rings to A. Here the CM thrust like a battering ram

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through double doors into a big kitchen full of stainless-steel appliances, including a walk-in refrigerator.

"We lack a morgue," he said by way of explanation.

Brother Ion and another, shorter monk were waiting beside the stiff and frosty body of a thick-set fiftyish man lying facedown on a stainless-steel table. A blue sheet covered him to the waist; a strap kept sheet and man from drifting. His upper torso was bare, and just under the left scapula a red circle drawn with a grease pencil highlighted an almost invisible two-centimeter-wide knife wound.

For a few seconds we stood there, three monks and a detective viewing the one reality that links our professions, the fact of death. Then I asked, "Autopsy report?"

"I'm the local M.D.," said the second monk. The voice was a pleasant surprise. This monk was a doc and this doc was a woman.

"You can call me Sister Jann," she went on. "I'm not a pathologist, but I did a full-body scan and opened him up for a cursory check of the damage inside. He died from a single thrust by a thin, double-edged blade inserted posteriorly through the intercostal space between the fourth and fifth ribs. It nicked the aorta and leakage into the thoracic cavity killed him. Neat job, by the way," she added with a touch of professional gusto. "Come to my office after Great Meditation and I'll give you everything I have."

"The Inspector will be joining us for the ceremony," came the CM's vibrating bass. He turned to me. "Brother Ion will take you to your cell. There you'll find your luggage and a clean habit. Put it on and let him guide you."

"Why do I have to attend a ceremony? I'm not a monk, I'm a cop, and I'd like to get on with the investigation."

"It was at the Great Meditation three days ago that our brother was slain. To understand how it happened, you have to attend."

So there it was. I was in for a session of cosmic consciousness because, somehow, it had to do with this guy taking a shiv in the back. There was more to the religious life than I'd expected.

Let me make it clear that I have nothing against meditation.

My wife Anna, who's Chinese by birth and also a doc, believes in it on medical grounds — it tunes up the alpha waves in the brain, lowers blood pressure, cures warts and I don't know what. Every day for years

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we'd spent twenty minutes sitting on a rug back to back, hands pressed to our respective *haras,* eyes cast down, breathing out, letting nature do the breathing in.

I found it nice. Relaxing. I was glad she made me do it. But for me it meant communion with myself and her, not with the cosmos.

This, on the other hand, was clearly going to be a production. When I was robed and hooded, Ion led me back to D Ring and into a dim amphitheater. I recognized it as a lecture hall, once the scene of cosmological get-togethers in the days when the orbital station was a scientific rather than a religious footstool to heaven. Below us, semicircular tiers funneled down to a stage holding a single empty chair like a throne. The only illumination came from a line of small red lights in the deck that divided the amphitheater into two unequal parts — more tiers below, fewer above. No seats; here you squatted or sat on the floor. Ion seated me on the highest tier, then descended and took up the half-lotus position in an empty spot near the stage. I saw him loop another belt around himself. The drifting problem again.

I did the same. Through open doors to the left and right other hooded figures began to enter, filling the lower tiers, settling with grunts into either the lotus or the half-lotus posture, depending on how limber their joints were. A moment passed and then other figures, equally anonymous in their robes, began to enter and fill the tiers above the lights. I figured these must be the guests — one of them presumably the gladiator suspected of knifing Brother Kendo.

Last of all the Chief Monk entered, robed and hooded. Leaning on one of his substantial arms was a tiny figure moving with a crablike gait. My first sight of Master Po, and I didn't see much — just one clawlike hand emerging from swathes of white. The CM deposited him on the throne and sat on the deck at his feet.

The red lights went out. Profound darkness followed, the down-in-a-cavern dark that blinds even a cat. Then the CM's voice boomed out like the thunder of an ancient god. "Thus, my brothers and my sisters, do all things begin. This is the original state of the cosmos, the abyss without form and without mode of the waste and wild Divinity."

His voice, if possible, deepened. "And then the forms of the universe emerged."

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With a soft murmur of well-oiled machinery, the ceiling began to open. A long narrow V appeared and spread rapidly to the shape of a quarter-moon. We were looking away from Terra into limitless spangled darkness.

I sucked in my breath, and so did everybody else. The hall seemed to inhale. Going about your daily life, eating, sleeping, working, scratching your butt, you know it's always there, this fathomlessness. But to see it this way, to be projected into it, was simply stupefying.

"Brothers and sisters, behold your Self. That art thou," intoned the voice, now issuing from noplace and everyplace. "Release yourselves from the bonds of ego. Release yourselves from the illusions of time and space. Know, feel, and experience the fact that this body, *your* body, already fills the ten parts of the universe."

He began to chant, and no human voice could have done it better than this invisible lion-faced monk.

"Auummmmmmmm," he intoned, and one hundred and twenty voices followed his lead. As the m-sound stretched out and out, it mimicked the harmonics of a great gong. Suddenly a real gong crashed through the amphitheater. I felt the belt tighten as if I were trying to levitate, as maybe I was. Another long tremolo of dying echoes.

"Auummmmmmm," came again as one voice. I was losing the sense of myself — or no, not that exactly: I was losing the sense that I'm *only* myself. At first it scared me and I fought against it. I was afraid of the darkness, the antiphonal chant of voices and gong, the stupefying sky bending over me.

Then gradually I stopped fighting. I let go, took a vacation from the ordinary. I was seeing with new eyes other forms of nature besides the transient atom called Robert — Robert —

Something. My name got lost. Like Alice in Wonderland, I was thinking, "L — I know it starts with L!" The bronze cymbal crashed. The chant resumed. The chains of time and place broke apart silently. How easy it would've been to slip off the belt, to let myself rise and mingle and converge. Float away on Heaven's River, as the Japanese call the Milky Way. I was thinking: the atoms, the particles, the quarks that make me also make *this*. The natural laws that bind me bind *this* as well. *This* is my true body, already filling the ten parts of the universe. *This* am I.

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All things together make a harmony, said Lao-Tzu. When not screwed up by human egotism and greed, added Kohn, unquenchably sardonic.

Oh right, that was my name. Slowly the religious experience faded. I started to breathe normally again, though I still had a fizzy, light-headed feeling. Machinery was purring, the ceiling was closing, the red lights flickering on. The whole amphitheater exhaled, the people sadly returning to their mere local selves. I checked my watch. Astounding. I could've sworn I'd been here maybe twenty minutes. In fact, one hour, nine minutes and an eternity had elapsed.

A long silence ensued. Then the Chief Monk stood up with a grunt, strode to a door, and eased it open. He returned to Master Po, helped him rise, and together they proceeded slowly out of the hall.

Others began to follow. Guests were standing, stretching cramped limbs. Somebody broke wind. The Great Meditation was over for the day.

FOLLOWING a light supper in a hall called the Refectory, I found my way to Sister Jann's small cluttered office next to the infirmary. She was sitting in a comfortable-looking chair with her hood thrown back — another violation of Regulation 19 — and frowning at the shadowbox of a computer. Floating in the darkness of the box was a three-dimensional schematic of a lengthy molecule. She gestured at the model. "Recognize this? We found it in a guest's quarters during the *aprés*-murder shakedown."

The display looked somewhat familiar. "Maybe GLS?"

"Very good, Colonel. You're almost right. It's a hypermodern designer drug derived from gamma-lysergin, just as GLS had its ancestor in plain old ordinary LSD. This stuff won't have hit the street yet. It's too exotic and too difficult to make. I suppose Councilor Mmahat uses it as an enhancer to his religious experiences."

"There's a Councilor of State up here?"

"The biggest of our VIGs — our Very Important Guests. Represents the Middle Eastern Council District. Background in Sufi mysticism, rich as sin and terribly important and powerful. His enemies call him the Whirling Dervish, among many other things. Here, sit down," she added, moving a Chinese paperweight and a heap of hardcopy to reveal a chair hiding beneath.

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I sat down and belted up. Sister Jann was a stocky woman with a short haircut and competent air. Her skin was almost translucent and her large gray eyes had the clear, unshockable calmness I've noticed in nursing sisters of the Mother Teresa Guild. Looking at her, the first word that crossed my mind was "virginal."

Trying a friendly approach, I told her my wife was also an M.D. whom I met in space. To my surprise, she frowned and seemed to get angry. "That's so typical. After centuries of effort, women still don't get equal treatment in medicine on Earth. That's why so many of us wind up in space."

Hastily I shifted my ground. "You know, Sister, the Chief Monk's quite a surprise to me. Isn't he an unusual type for a lamasery?"

"Not really. In a religious community you need somebody with genuine insight to provide spiritual guidance, but you also need somebody to make things run. So there's the Master, and there's the CM, who very definitely knows how to make things run."

"I found him pretty impressive just now."

She shrugged. "He's got charisma, I'll admit that. But he's about as deep as spit. This stuff he peddles — a little Taoism, a little Buddhism, a little this, a little that — it's sort of Zen Lite."

"Thanks for your frank opinion."

"I can afford to be frank," she said, "because his machinery of spying — pardon me, his monitoring system — is broken and he's still trying to get a technician up from Terra to fix it. It's such an antique, he can't find parts for it. How's the investigation going?"

"It'll get started as soon as you give me the autopsy data on Brother Kendo and tell me exactly what happened to him. Incidentally," I added, "whether you like the CM or not, he was absolutely right when he made me attend the Great Meditation. While that's going on, *anything* could happen and never be noticed."

She nodded soberly. "It's sad, really sad in a way. This isn't the first time somebody's used a religious service as a cover for murder, you know. One of the Renaissance Popes tried to have Lorenzo de' Medici assassinated at high mass. The signal for the murderer to strike was the bell ringing at the consecration of the host. Well, let's get to work."

She rummaged in her desk, pulled out a memory cube and gave it to me.

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"Here's everything you never wanted to know about Brother Kendo. I also pulled his personnel records because the record keeper was Kendo himself, and as you know he's in the refrigerator. So you've got how he died, the state of his health prior to that, his retinagraph, DNA profile, personal history, his police record — or rather, his lack of one. In short, the works."

"I'm sure it'll make good reading. Now suppose you tell me something about the guy that's not in the records."

"He was a rather boring, sullen man. A loner. Hid himself away in the archives most of the time. Very good with numbers, I can't imagine why the CM didn't put him in the treasurer's office. Kendo had a temper, usually under control but not always. One day for no visible reason he punched a nuclear-steel rib of the hull so hard that he broke three bones in his hand. While I was splinting the hand I said, 'Now, brother, what made you blow up like that?' He said, 'It's private,' and that was all I could get out of him."

"So he was a guy with internal tension."

"Yes. But internal tension didn't kill him."

"Tell me about the crime."

She leaned back and put her fingertips together. A lot of technical experts make that gesture when they're about to give testimony. Makes them look judicious.

"Considering that everybody in the station was present, the crime was astonishingly easy to miss. A single outcry, so they say. I doubt if many people even heard it. I know I didn't. When the lights came on, Brother Kendo was sitting just below the lights with one hand clutching his chest. People were turning and looking at him. The brother seated nearest asked him what was wrong and he said, 'A stabbing pain. In the heart.'"

"Very accurate, that," I murmured.

"Well, Kendo had an esophageal hernia, so chest pains were an old story for him. It didn't seem serious at first, not even to him. Nevertheless, he looked quite pale and two brothers asked him if he could walk. He said yes. They helped him up and he walked to the door. There he fainted. By the time they got him to the infirmary, he was dead. It was only when they undressed him that they noticed a bloodstain on his undershirt. Almost

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all the bleeding was internal. You should've seen the mess when I opened him up."

"Can you tell me why the CM thinks one of the guests did it?"

"For one thing, only guests were sitting behind Kendo. Besides, the killing was skillful, you know. Professional. Well, we've got a professional among the guests, as you may have heard. Our gladiator, a Korean called Huksa Byung. Must do real combat. He had a cyst on his back, took his robe off to let me work on it, and I can tell you he's got more scar tissue than skin."

"Do you think he's guilty?"

"I do not. Why in the world would a champion gladiator travel thirty-six thousand clicks into space to kill a morose, silent, friendless, penniless monk? The Chief Monk's trying to screw up your mind," she added, going back to her *bête noire*. "He doesn't want the killer to be a monk, because that would be embarrassing, and he doesn't want the killer to be one of his important guests because that would cost the lamasery a donor. That's why he's scapegoating Huksa Byung."

"Was there any physical evidence?"

"Not in the hall, with all those people tramping around. At least none that we could find. We're not set up here to do real forensic science, but I made the old standard tests for occult blood — neoluminol, black light and so forth. No luck. Brother Ion — he's the CM's enforcer, you know — led a search of every cubic centimeter of living and storage space in Heaven's Footstool, trying to find the weapon. No luck for him either."

"I presume the guests were also searched?"

"Patted down by a monk or nun."

"Body cavity searches?"

"Impossible, Inspector. You don't do a digital on a Councilor of State's rectum unless he agrees to it. Nor on Huksa Byung either, unless *he* agrees. Besides, the knife had to have a blade at least twenty centimeters long and must have been razor sharp. You might want to hide that in a body cavity, but I would not."

"Anything like that in your medical kit that somebody could have borrowed?"

"No. I do have a few scalpels for jobs like puncturing the gladiator's cyst, but they're all too small to make the wound. The CM's quite a fanatic

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about his no-weapons policy and everything that even looks dangerous gets catalogued and locked away. The chances are overwhelming that the weapon was brought here in somebody's luggage, and that's another reason the CM's convinced the villain's a guest. You know," she added, "I don't like the man. He's a bully and a faker. But I do think he wants to find out who killed Kendo. The murder scares him, it baffles him, and he's not a man who likes being either baffled or scared."

That seemed to cover it. I pocketed the cube, got up to go. Then stopped. Before leaving, I wanted to satisfy my curiosity on one point that had nothing to do with the murder. I asked when Heaven's Footstool turned coed.

"It's an experiment. I'm all for it, integrating the monks and the nuns. Some are starting to marry one another, and I'm all for that too, though I'm celibate myself by choice."

"All this is rather different from the lamaseries on Terra," I commented.

"Our brothers and sisters down below follow the ancient rules of sexual segregation and forced celibacy. But they'll come to see our viewpoint in the end."

"I haven't heard of any murders in lamaseries down below."

"Perhaps they have no guests," smiled Sister Jann.

IRONICALLY — for a retired cop — my room was called a cell. It lived up to the name. Two meters by three, with a single bed, desk, chair, wash stand with a Lucite dome and a vacuum pump to recover water and cleanser. Wall clock, waste-material vent, the usual belts on the chair and bed, everything clamped to the deck. I'd already located the nearest latrine and shower room, down the corridor. I assumed that VIGs had more luxurious accommodations, but didn't really expect them for myself.

I'd had a long day, but decided to view the cube anyway, because I wanted to be up to speed about the victim when I started interviewing people in the morning. The clock murmured that the time — Heaven's Footstool used Greenwich Mean Time — was 2040 and Lights Out would come at 2130. I lay down on the bunk, took out my omni, inserted the cube, and on the ten-by-ten cm screen Brother Kendo's life started

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unreeling. He was born Drago Stancic fifty-four years ago in the warrens of the Luna Underground. Librarian and information control tech by profession. Married young, fathered two children whose present whereabouts were unknown. No police record on either Luna or Terra. Served briefly in the military without either distinction or disgrace. Divorced by his wife on grounds of incompatibility.

Then the big break in his life. Thirteen years ago he entered a lamasery, at that time making over his small worldly wealth to the Order. His satorist recorded that he made a "significant spiritual breakthrough into cosmic consciousness" nine years ago. After post-enlightenment training, he requested a transfer to Heaven's Footstool, where his professional skills proved useful. Assigned to keep the personnel records.

Further useless facts: Brother Kendo weighed seventy-eight kilos at his last physical before leaving Terra, stood one point six meters tall, had a sexual-orientation rating of point nine het, and suffered from a hiatal hernia, marginal blood-sugar, and a tendency to hyperlipidemia. He died in possession of his tonsils, appendix, and foreskin, the lucky devil. He was "predominantly celibate," whatever that might mean. His work record was good....

I suppose at that point I conked out. When I woke, wondering where the hell I was, the overhead light was still on. The omni had switched itself off. It lay on my chest, a silvery oblong twenty-five cm long. A bell was shrilling someplace in the corridor outside. Wondering why my whole body felt stiff and cold, I fantasized briefly that I was Brother Kendo laid out in the freezer. In short, I was disoriented.

Then the clock — displaying 0430 — informed me in the cool impersonal accents favored by garrulous machinery that I had half an hour to prepare for compulsory tai-chi muscle-toning exercises in Earthside Hall, followed by *zazen* or sitting meditation, followed by breakfast at 0700 in the Refectory. A new day had come to Heaven's Footstool, and I rose up like Frankenstein, laid the omni on the desk, and staggered toward the door to meet it.

I spent the next thirty minutes in the company of a large number of male and female monks unhooded, as we all performed our morning rituals in the latrine and shower room. Interesting. The brother-and-sister lingo seemed to fit the way the men and women actually treated one

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another. Shower stalls had doors and small dressing cubicles and formed private spaces for whoever was occupying them. The general atmosphere resembled a unisex barracks or college dorm, though noisier because of the gulping sounds of the vacuum plumbing.

Then the community shuffled off, many sticky boots moving at once, in what I guessed was the direction of Earthside Hall. Didn't figure I needed muscle-toning myself, since I didn't plan to be here long enough to have mine turn to jelly. Instead, after robing I wandered the corridors until appetizing smells started to emanate from the Refectory. Here I dawdled until the monks appeared, then stepped in among them, noting with interest how easily one more robed figure could be absorbed into the throng unnoticed.

Breakfast turned out to be a subdued affair, eaten in silence — porridge and strong green tea, loaves of fresh hot bread from the monks' own bakery and jars of fruit preserves with labels from half the farming regions of Terra. Meanwhile a reader perched on a dais read from the *Tao Teh Ching*. Anna introduced me to Lao-tzu, her fellow Chinese, and I've grown to like him as an honest man.

"The Great Tao is without pity, it burns the families of men like straw dogs," intoned the reader. That I know to be true. The cosmos is fascinating, but it lacks a heart.

As I was finishing, a monk tapped me on the shoulder and Brother Ion's gruff voice invited me to visit the CM at my earliest convenience, "like yesterday," as he put it. So I followed him out, trying to arrange in my head a plausible plan of action with which to appease his holiness.

The Reverend Aung Chai sat at his desk in exactly the same posture as before — one forearm flat, the other raised.

"Sit, sit," he said. "I want to know what you've found out, if anything, and what theories of the crime you may have formed."

He glanced at his wall clock. "Ten minutes," he added.

I gave him the usual bureaucratic run-around. If you haven't accomplished anything, you try to look busy. I explained I'd reviewed Kendo's records and discussed the autopsy findings with Sister Jann. I regretted the fact that a scientific examination hadn't been made of the crime scene. Whatever evidence might have been found by now had been hopelessly

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corrupted, so interrogation would have to do the trick. I proposed to start with the guests, since the supply shuttle was due in two days and some of them might want to go home.

"As I told you," he said abruptly, "I suspect one of them is guilty. You know which one."

"You may be right. But I'm not yet convinced that any guest did it."

I got that terrific frown again. "Exactly why not?"

I paused to appreciate the "exactly," then went into my spiel. "With everybody dressed alike at the Great Meditation and the dim lights and all the shuffling around, I don't see why a monk couldn't have slipped in among the guests in the corridor, entered with them and sat down behind Kendo. Then mingled with the monks again during the confusion afterward. I mean, nobody was counting, right?"

The frown deepened. "Do you find that scenario more believable than mine? If so, why?"

I was getting sick of being grilled. So I spoke a bit more frankly. "Monasteries of all faiths are famous for their inner feuds and hatreds. Too many incompatible people living too close together. That sort of thing could provide a motive, and I'm sure you realize that the question of motive is fundamental. I naturally wonder why a guest — all of them well-heeled, from what I hear, and at least one a powerful public figure — would travel thirty-six thousand clicks just to stab a middle-aged monk. That also goes for your gladiator."

I was practically quoting Sister Jann. He didn't look terribly happy, but he didn't argue either. I could almost see the wheels turning inside that huge head. If the gladiator didn't do it, he'd prefer the guilty party to be a monk. Anything to shield his VIGs.

But I wasn't finished. "However, there's another scenario that makes Kendo a more plausible victim. With the dim lights and everybody looking more or less the same, the killer might have made a mistake. After all, this murder was literally a stab in the dark."

Suddenly he was tense again. "If that's the case, then the real target of the attack is still in danger. And that means you can't afford to dawdle. We have some important people here, especially Councilor Mmahat. What would happen if a Councilor of State were murdered, I can't imagine."

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On the contrary, I saw in his face that he could imagine it only too well. The uproar that would follow on Terra. The media overkill. The speeches in the Council. Maybe even Heaven's Footstool losing its sovereignty!

"Then perhaps I'd better get to work."

"By all means." Those mesmeric eyes didn't, however, let me go. "Wait a minute. I just realized something. A few years back — weren't you the fellow they blamed for the catastrophe on Planet Bela?"

"Yes. Because I made the mistake of surviving."

"Well, try not to make another mistake, Colonel. This is serious, very serious. I'll expect a progress report every day at 0730. Good-bye."

And that appeared to be that. The dark unblinking eyes followed me through the door, where Brother Ion or somebody shaped exactly like him waited with his fists opening and closing. Maybe just exercise? Or maybe he had internal tensions, too.

During my pre-breakfast walk, I'd noticed a section of the B Ring marked *Reserved for Honored Guests*. I found it again and started exploring.

Here every door had a nameplate but I found no Huksa Byung. Checked again, found Rhee — the only name that looked Korean — and knocked.

The man who opened the door resembled a bronze ingot in a white robe, only much bigger. Shaved and polished scalp, keloid ridges on ears and brows. I explained why I was here and he nodded me in.

The cell of a paying guest turned out to be considerably larger than mine and boasted a separate bedroom and a private bath. Still, everything was pretty austere, all the furniture bare and bolted down in the usual fashion. The only decoration was a celadon vase holding a cherry blossom made of faux silk. Well, in the East the cherry blossom — odd as it seems to western eyes — is a traditional symbol of the warrior. It's the only reminder I could see of Rhee's earthly profession.

"Someone told me your name is Huksa Byung," I began.

"That's the name I fight under. It means Black Death." He smiled. He had several gold teeth showing. "It makes my opponents uneasy."

"I just bet it does. Are you a barehanded fighter, or — "

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"Or a knife fighter?" Quick golden grin again. "No, I do straight Tae Kwan Do. Korean karate. Never liked those closed-channel butcheries where they use cesti and knives and spurs like animals. Fighting bare-handed or in gloves, it's more like an art. Of course, people sometimes die anyway. When you're in the habit of breaking stones with your hands, you're bound to break bones occasionally. Or necks."

He beamed like Hotei the Happy God, minus the pot belly. Considering he probably knew seventeen ways to kill me with one blow, he was an affable fellow. I suppose he could afford to be.

"Can I ask why you came to Heaven's Footstool?"

"Wanted to see what it's like. Meditation's a fine discipline. It's the opposite of the rough stuff, and therefore provides balance. Yin and yang, sort of. Also it purges the fear of death and, after all, my business is facing death. Sometimes handing it out. Whenever I kill an opponent, I always bow down to him, honor his spirit. Set up a tablet with his name in the Warrior Temple in New Seoul. After all, there's no real difference between slayer and slain."

"'We be of one blood, thou and I.'" Quoting Kipling, one of my favorite ancient authors.

"Yes, exactly. I'm always aware that the guys I happen to kill are my brothers. That's why I treat them with respect."

This was the most civilized conversation about killing people I'd ever had. Pretty soon Black Death had his wallet out, showing me pictures of his wives and children. "I make all my kids learn self-defense, but I also tell them, 'You decide to become a gladiator, I'll break your arms!' I don't want them running the risks I do."

We finally got down to the Great Meditation at which Kendo was killed. Black Death claimed that he sat two tiers above the victim and didn't notice that anything was wrong until the man passed out near the door.

"Recognize any of the people sitting around you?"

"Not really. Well, Councilor Mmahat was sitting right in front of me, I could recognize him by his height. He's nearly as tall as you are. But with the darkness and the chanting and all — no, I didn't really notice anybody else. Just row after row after row of dim forms in the starlight, like white tablets lined up in a memorial temple. You know," he added thoughtfully,

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"the murder was really a professional job. Bold, but also cold. I like that. It shows class."

My reaction to Mr. Black Death was that he showed class, too. Also, I was extremely glad I'd never have to fight him. So I said good-bye, stepped out into the corridor, found Mmahat's door and knocked softly.

It was thrown open by a large man with black eyes and scimitar nose set in a long, horsy face. "Ah yes!" he cried. "You're the inspector. Come in. Come in!" His expression seemed to say: *Your superiors grovel to me, so I know you will, too.*

I entered a large room whose walls were decorated with shields bearing intricate inscriptions in Arabic. On a mother-of-pearl inlaid table with magnetized strips a veiled serving woman was laying out bowls covered by clear plastic. Two lustrous dark eyes rested on me for a moment, then turned away. Her veil covered her top to toe, but was nearly transparent, and it rippled like clear dark water over opulent breasts and hips. The Councilor knew how to choose a handmaiden.

Reluctantly removing my gaze from the *houri*, I saw through a half-open door a bedroom — a serving bot was making the bed — and one corner of a bathroom sheathed in gold panels. Not only were guests better off than monks, some guests were more equal than others. Class distinctions had invaded heaven — or at any rate, Heaven's Footstool.

The Councilor sat down to breakfast, and I was permitted to sit and interview him. He sipped a tiny container of Turkish coffee through a straw, but didn't offer me any.

"You want to talk about this murder, of course," he said. He had a resonant voice, accustomed to large halls and no contradiction.

"Yes, your excellency."

"I was the one who convinced the CM to send for a professional to investigate this business. Can't have a killer running around, putting important people in danger. Of course, whatever you find out, it'll all have to be hushed up. Catch the bastard, push him through the airlock, and move on. Can't have religion getting a black eye. Wealth, know-how, and the mysteries of faith — those are the three legs the world system stands on. I was raised to worship Allah, and I have Christian and Jewish colleagues I respect deeply" — he gazed at me meaningfully, as much as to say *Jews like you* — "but there's no doubt that with China and India

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dominating the earth, this pan-Asian stuff the White Monks teach is the elephant in today's religious menagerie.

"Doesn't matter a bit, that's my view. All roads lead to Roma, et cetera. New Angkor in this case. What counts is having the prevailing religion, whatever it is, bless the system that runs the world."

"Just so," I murmured. "Can we discuss the murder? I'm sure your excellency will be a most important witness."

"Important! I should say so! I saw the crime happen!"

"You *saw* it happen?"

Mmahat liberated a round rice cake from its prison in a bowl, let it float upward, captured it and spread it with some sort of jelly. "Yes," he mumbled, chewing. "Of course I didn't know it at the time. I'd found a place right behind the lights. The CM proceeded to do his act — absolutely marvelous! If he hadn't dedicated his life to religion, he'd be in the Council of State today. Astounding performance! Where was I?"

"You sat down behind the lights."

"Yes. Not entirely satisfactory, that. They really should have a section reserved for people who matter. I've brought that to the CM's attention. But anyway. During the meditation I was simply enraptured, moved more profoundly, I believe, than the monks themselves at the glorious universe created by the Ever-Living One. I wouldn't be surprised if I levitated just a bit."

Remembering the super GLS discovered in his quarters, I found this easy to believe.

"Then, as the roof was closing I began to descend, so to speak. Yet my mind remained crystal clear. *Crystal* clear," he repeated, as if he'd just coined the phrase.

"Suddenly I heard a cry. Not loud, but sharp and close at hand. A couple of meters away on the first tier below the lights — which were beginning to flicker on — I caught a movement in the corner of one eye and turned my head. An arm in a white sleeve was touching the back of the monk who'd made the sound. I thought someone was asking him to be quiet. Then the arm withdrew. The monk halfway rose to his feet and two others got up and went to him to see what was wrong. I heard a voice say 'pain,' I think — yes, it said 'pain.' The two assisted him to walk and the three of them moved off toward the end of the tier. Then, of course,

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everybody was rising, stretching if they felt cramped and so forth. I was heading for the door myself when I saw that the fellow had fallen, and several monks were bending over him." He selected a hard-boiled egg, peeled it, and let the fragments of shell drift away. The handmaiden approached with serpentine grace and began capturing the bits of shell in midair with a tiny net such as goldfish fanciers keep.

"Getting back to my original statement," Mmahat went on, "I actually saw the murder take place. Absolutely fascinating. When I get back to New Angkor, I'll be dining out on the story for months."

"Hard on the monk, of course," I murmured.

"Yes, poor devil. However, I don't suppose he had much of a life anyway." He continued to eat his breakfast.

I rose, stole a last glance at the *houri*, bowed, and departed. As to how far I should trust Mmahat's testimony, and what use I could make of it if true, I had at that moment no idea whatsoever.

WELL, THERE'S NO USE repeating most of the stories I spent that long, tedious day listening to. Like most witnesses, the VIGs divided into two groups, those who remembered nothing useful, and those who remembered things that had never happened.

Still, I did get a good feel for the lamasery's A-list. Quite a who's-who of prominent people who either had spiritual interests or liked to pretend they had. A couple of trillionaires, an artist who did holographic portraits said to be superior to Rembrandt's, society women with time on their hands (at least three of whom indicated they might find me interesting in an unofficial capacity, say later on that night). Plus some pale youngsters with drug problems, trust funds, and no idea how to make sense of their lives.

The very last interview of the day turned out to be different, even though at the time it seemed like more of the same.

"Immensely healthy and inspiring," said the witness, a Grande Dame of the Solar System, an elderly lady who looked, and undoubtedly was, rich. She spoke in squeaks and harsh grating noises, like a very expensive parrot.

Actually, the Grande Dame had seen nothing that contributed in any way to solving the murder. But she was quite willing to bend my ears with

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accounts of her life on Earth, which sounded pretty tedious, since she lived surrounded by a legion of bots and human servants who did everything for her except digest her food.

Heaven's Footstool was her great escape from the banality of wealth. She came every year; said it cost her seven hundred thousand a pop, but was worth it. (I surmised that if it cost less, she'd value it accordingly and stay home.) Living under weightless or near-weightless conditions was *so* good for the arteries. She slept better there than anyplace except in her hyperbaric chamber. The ceremonies were awe-inspiring; the Chief Monk possessed incredible charisma. On her last visit he gave her a *koan* or spiritual problem to work on. She gave him a conventional answer, and he slapped her — not very hard, but hard enough to destroy the cocoon of pride she used to live in.

"I really feel *that* was the moment of my awakening," she said.

I was beginning to envy the CM. But of course cops don't swat Grande Dames. Lest I be tempted to do so, I got up.

"Thank you for your assistance, my lady," I murmured, bowing and kissing her thin blue-veined hand. She saw me to her door, never ceasing to chatter.

"Such a disgraceful crime...profaning a holy place...like King Henry the Whatever, back in the Christian era, murdering that archbishop fellow on the altar...the poor man, slaughtered in the very place where he thought he'd found sanctuary...."

I was halfway through the door when I realized that the last sentence didn't refer to Thomas á Becket. "Just where *who* found sanctuary?" I demanded.

"Why, the poor fellow who was murdered. I saw him in the infirmary one day when I went in for a shot. He'd been injured somehow, he was lying down and his hood was pushed back. I recognized him at once. He used to run an investment bank in New Manhattan. Oh, he was just a teeny bit crooked, everybody knew that, that was how he was able to earn his more select clients such wonderful returns on their money. I was so shocked when the police came after him. You know these government prosecutors, always putting the worst possible construction on everything. Anyway, he got away in time, but until I saw him up here I didn't know where he'd escaped to. Now what was his name — some Slavic

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name. Kristovsky? No...Krovich, that was it! I never forget anyone who makes me richer."

I bowed and kissed her hand a second time. "Don't mention this to anyone else," I cautioned her. "Remember, the killer's still at large and might decide to silence you."

"Oh, how thrilling! I do think, Inspector, that this has been my most profoundly interesting visit here ever. I'll be silent as the grave until I get home, and then tell simply *everyone!*"

Back in my cell, seated, belt clasping my *hara*, I tried to make sense of the few dubious pearls of information that my long, mostly boring day had brought me.

Heaven's Footstool was silent, everybody but me at the Great Meditation. I'd grabbed some leftovers from the kitchen so I could eat a light supper alone and concentrate on the case. Questions: Should I arrest the gladiator, even though I think he's innocent? Could I trust the Councilor, even though he's a druggie? Should I believe the Grande Dame, even though she's a fool?

The only checkable item was the real identity of the corpse, for whom I now had three names — Kendo, Stancic, and Krovich. Decided to run the memory cube Sister Jann gave me through Security's central archives. My omni did the sending in a few milliseconds. Then I sat and ate bread and cheese and sipped wine through a straw, wishing Anna were there to share the goodies with me.

Nine minutes later, I got a return message confirming the data. The info on the cube matched exactly the dossier of Stancic, Drago, who took the name Kendo when he went religious. Nothing about anybody named Krovich. So that took care of the Grande Dame, with her probably failing memory, her boring life, and her consequent love of self-dramatization. She'd made up the story, that's all.

Or did she?

Hmm. Liars, damn liars, and government archives. I never worked Fraud, and the name Krovich meant nothing to me. Nor did the man's face. Yet I could think offhand of at least three famous homicides — important person gets killed, planetary uproar follows — where the accused simply evaporated into thin air. Or into empty space.

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I mean, look: If I assumed the records were right, I had nothing. If I assumed the Grande Dame was right — wow! A stunningly rich field for speculation. Heaven's Footstool. Legally a sovereign world, untouchable by Terran authorities. Perhaps granted its sovereignty precisely because well-heeled people sometimes need a getaway, and I don't mean a place to recharge their spiritual power packs. And by providing them a refuge, many, many other people could assure themselves of substantial bribes.

Great Tao, but it must have been expensive to get there! I could imagine a lifetime of ill-gotten gains vanishing like smoke as a refugee from the law bribed whole layers of officialdom to create a false identity, embed it in the central records, issue a forged exit visa, and make it worthwhile for the White Monks to accept and conceal him.

How frustrated Krovich must have been, a financier reduced to the life of a common monk while his wealth went to stuff the already weighty pockets of others. No wonder he punched a rib of nuclear steel. A private matter, he told Sister Jann. Yes — very private.

But was all this really possible? I sat drumming my fingers, wishing I had Anna to talk it over with. I could call her at home, of course, but somebody up here could very well monitor the call, and certainly it would be picked up Earthside by Security. And if by any chance I was right about what was going on, at least a few people at HQ had to be in on it.

Heaven's Footstool. The Flying Vatican. Suddenly I was remembering an anecdote Sister Jann told me about a homicidal Pope. Maybe, I thought, I'd better refresh my memory about the original Vatican. I knew it was centuries back in the Christian Era, during the Age of the Warring States — maybe even earlier, in the Middle Ages. And that was about all.

I told the omni, "Research," and asked my question. Great gadget. In a few seconds the answer began to unroll. Vatican, a hill just outside what was now the village of Roma in the European Council District. A long, colorful history. Magnificent ruins still visited by tourists. A hologram popped up, showing a vast shattered temple with statues of gods defaced by time, weather, and war.

Once the Popes ruled Roma, then it was taken over by a nation called Italia. In the twentieth century the Vatican was made an independent micro-state to give the chief priest of the Christians political independence. But it also became a refuge for all sorts of unpleasant characters

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who happened to have an in with the church bureaucracy — absconding bankers (!), right-wing politicians with blood on their hands, prominent churchmen tarred by pedophile scandals. In time its reputation became so bad that the Vatican State was abolished and reabsorbed into Italia.

I went on reading for an hour or more. It was the first time I'd gotten an overview of this lost world, and it was fascinating. The Popes, the Cardinals, the religious orders. Among them were saints, ascetics, statesmen and scholars — also fools, debauchees, fanatics, and monsters. So everything I'd been imagining already happened, long ago. A holy place becomes a refuge for unholy characters. Lao-tzu again: *All things are bright on one side and dark on the other.*

Damn tiresome of history, telling the same old stories over and over.

But now I'd got at least a glimmer of a possible motive. Somebody going into space to kill a middle-aged monk — highly improbable. But what if the monk was an absconding banker? What if somebody that Krovich had cheated in the past found out where he was hiding, and either sent an assassin or came to do the job himself?

Mr. Black Death. Yes, even if I liked the guy, I had to admit he was prime material for a hired killer. Maybe getting a bit old for fighting, wanted to spend some years in peace at home with his family. Killing an unknown monk might strike him as equivalent to swatting a fly, only much more rewarding. There was a *lot* more to the religious life than I'd realized. This was starting to sound like Renaissance Roma. I'd just been reading about a Pope who had his bravos grind a cheap diamond to powder and sprinkle it on Bevenuto Cellini's dinner in order to perforate his intestines. That, I thought, was even nastier than —

At that exact moment the screaming started.

It came from the corridor outside, pretty close to my door.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and jumped up, nearly launching myself against the ceiling, and ran out, stuffing the omni into my pocket after remembering at the last second to set it on Record. Then followed the sounds up the corridor to D Ring.

A crowd had formed near the airlock. The usual anonymous white-robed figures, now agitated, chattering away as if there were no Regulation

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4, no rule of silence. I shouldered my way through and halted, staring into the open lock.

It was crowded in there too, monks gathered around another body. I pushed to the front. The corpse was frosted over, another chunk of frozen meat, lying on his right side with knees bent.

"Who's this?" I demanded.

"It's Brother Ion," said an anonymous figure. I tried to turn back the stiff cloth of his hood and it cracked like glass, broke off and burned my fingers like dry ice.

For a moment I was stunned, just staring. Then I shooed the monks out of the airlock like a flock of chickens and turned back to the body. So this is what Ion looked like. A set, square gray face, scarred on the cheek, the visible left eye fixed and bulging, a bristle of beard covered with hoarfrost now beginning to melt in the warm air entering from D Ring.

Oh yes, I knew him. Not the name — it had been a long time since I saw his dossier. But he was another fugitive, and the charge against him was murder. *Multiple* murders.

Mechanically I proceeded with a task I've been doing much of my life. As I worked, recording hundreds of angles on the omni, another kind of recognition began to dawn. Krovich had rested in a completely different posture, flat on his belly, back up. Yet gazing at Ion, I felt an overwhelming sense of déjà vu — felt it all over again, as the philosopher said. Here was another chunky, bearded, middle-aged man of medium height, wrapped in webs of ice.

Bizarre thoughts went flickering through my head. Some killers pursue a certain physical type. Especially sexual predators, with their specialized appetites for girls, boys, hookers, blondes, brunettes — even for dwarves, the crippled, or the blind. But somebody with a compulsion to kill middle-sized, middle-aged men with beards? I was shaking my head over that when Sister Jann slipped into the lock, carrying her medical bag.

She viewed Brother Ion, muttered "Oh dear," then asked, "Can you turn him on his back? I'd like to check for a wound."

I wrenched the body over. Like turning an ice statue. No wound appeared, but something just as informative did. A murmur ran through the onlookers in the doorway — also several stifled laughs. Everybody was

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looking at the little tent of white cloth over Brother Ion's crotch. The corpse had an erection, a substantial one at that, frozen in place.

Sister Jann shook her head. "Things become more and more embarrassing," she murmured.

Abruptly the monks scattered as the CM erupted into the lock. All by himself, he seemed to overfill it. "What's this?" he roared. "What's this?"

Since the answer was perfectly obvious, neither Sister Jann nor I said anything.

"My right hand," muttered the CM. "First they sabotaged the monitoring system. Now they've cut off my right hand."

"They who?" I asked, ungrammatically.

"My enemies. It's a campaign. It's a deliberate campaign to ruin me."

He'd sunk to one knee. The huge face turned up and gave me the fierce heartless stare of a wounded lion.

"What the hell have you been doing all day?" he demanded. "Why didn't you prevent this?"

I stepped back, pushed by the almost palpable aura of rage and fear flowing from the Reverend Aung Chai. I said nothing because, once again, there was nothing to say.

Breathing heavily, he rose to his feet. Great *Tao* but the man was big. I'm used to looking down on people, but he looked me straight in the eye. He said in a quieter voice, quieter but perhaps more dangerous, "I want a complete report on this in the morning. Complete. Don't think, Colonel, you have forever to stop this...this *thing*."

Then he was gone, whirling monks out of his way like chaff.

At Sister Jann's orders, a couple of monks broke the corpse loose from the deck and pushed it — floating, no gurney needed — to the impromptu morgue beside the big refrigerators in the kitchen. I followed, walking beside her, pondering a case that suddenly had too much data instead of too little.

"Ion skipped the Great Meditation?" I asked.

"So it would seem."

"But not alone."

"No, that doesn't seem likely. Well, nobody counts the attendees, you know. Over a hundred people, dressed all alike. The darkness, the chanting...."

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"I know. Will you do the post-mortem tonight?"

"Yes. Not that there's much doubt about how he died. He was quick-frozen. But after the body thaws, I want to check him over thoroughly before rigor sets in."

I was turning to go when something struck me. "One question, Sister. What was Ion's orientation rating?"

She looked baffled. "One-point-oh het. Rather unusual. These days, most people are a bit more ambiguous than that. But why do you — "

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm feeling an urge to meditate."

SOMETIMES you just have to sit down and think, hard work though it is. But before I began trying to put the pieces together, I figured I'd better call my wife. I'd have done so the night before, except that I fell asleep over Brother Kendo's bio.

"I thought you'd forgotten about me," she said.

"Never. How's everything in Manypalms?"

"Oh, the usual. Mr. Applebaum had a stroke, but I got to him in time and he's resting comfortably, or as comfortably as you can at the age of a hundred and six. Sometimes I wonder if living as long as people do nowadays really is a good idea. Your martial arts class called, they want to know when you're coming back to break piles of bricks with them. Speaking of that, how's the investigation going?"

Bearing in mind the possibility of being overheard, I told her, oh, things were getting sorted out little by little. She asked whether my asthma was acting up — a private code we'd agreed on before I left, meaning *Are you in danger*? I said no, no symptoms worth mentioning, "If I feel it coming on," I added, "I'll know what to do."

Incautiously, I added a few words of praise for her fellow medico, Sister Jann.

"Oh?" Anna said, in an absolutely neutral voice.

"Oh, come on. She's a nun, and celibate besides. Anyway, I'm too old to fool around."

"Too old — *you*??" she asked, with just the right amount of exaggerated wonder, and we enjoyed a chuckle. Before signing off, she asked when I'd be back.

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"Before you think," I told her. At that moment I knew I was going to do whatever in the hell it took to get my aging butt back home soonest.

I settled down to work. Anna taught me long ago how to go at a problem the Zen way. Zen was originally Chinese; it was called Ch'an, and there's a Chinese pun that says, "The taste of *Ch'an* (Zen) is the taste of *ch'a* (tea)." Figuring that was a good idea, I revisited the kitchen and brought back a pot of strong black stuff to clarify my thoughts and help me stay awake. I put a straw into the teapot through a flexible nipple and settled down. I assumed the half-lotus position, belted in, and spent a while sipping, my mind blank, just breathing in and out.

Don't think...don't think...now, *think!*

I began reviewing the evidence, playing sections of my recordings back from time to time to refresh my memory. About midnight I started to draw conclusions.

First, there was no longer the slightest doubt about the CM hiding fugitives on Heaven's Footstool. Ion's real name still eluded me, but his face was engraved on my memory from the time when — ten, maybe twelve years ago? — I was briefly assigned to a task force that hunted him without success. Not an impulse killer, either. The man was a pro. A skilled assassin, not a simple murderer.

Checking the Security records for more data on him would be pointless. I already knew that by the time a fugitive reached this — what did the Grande Dame call it? — this *sanctuary*, the records had already been purged. By now his physical data adorned a bland biography either stolen from some innocuous citizen, or made up out of the whole cloth. Only the brain of an aging cop had proved impossible to reprogram.

What mattered, I told myself, was that I knew who murdered Brother Kendo. Why the job looked so professional. Why it took place at exactly the right place and time, when everybody's attention was absorbed elsewhere. Why the weapon wasn't found — after all, Ion himself led the search.

Now for the real question: Who hired Ion for the job? Okay, I thought, let's assume the obvious — somebody with money. So maybe Aung Chai had been right after all when he accused a guest. The guest didn't do the killing, of course. The CM's own "right hand" and enforcer did it, proving only that assassins are apt to be bad employees.

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But a guest suborned the murder. Why? I didn't know, but I knew I'd damn well have to find out before I arrested him. Yes, I said *him*. The fact that Ion was a perfect heterosexual and died in a state of arousal had caused me to waste a couple of hours suspecting a woman — until I remembered Councilor Mmahat and his sinuous handmaiden. Despite his act of pomposity, snobbery, and self-important foolishness, underneath lay a much deeper and darker character — or so I now believed. One who purchased a murder with money, drugs, and the promise of sex with the most seductive female in Heaven's Footstool. Then used her to lure the killer (maybe befuddled in advance with GLS?) into the airlock.

I wondered how many of my Security Forces colleagues had ever tried to get the goods on a Councilor of State. Not many, I bet. I'd have to have everything nailed down, and actual proof would be hell to find. I was still brooding when the clock coolly announced 0430, startling me. The whole night was gone and, more than anything else, right now I wanted a shower and breakfast.

Later I'd have to see Sister Jann to get the autopsy report on Ion. And I'd have to report to the CM — not exactly an inviting prospect, now that I knew him for what he was. Then the struggle to get Mmahat before the shuttle arrived to whisk him home, where he had power enough to stop any investigation. I needed to get him here, while he was far from home in a sovereign world where he was not a Councilor of State.

I needed help. I needed somebody with power to back me up. Well, I knew only too well where I *couldn't* get it. And I was beginning to think I might also know where I *could*.

The military, with its unerring ear for the gross, thus sums up the beginning of a new day: shit, shave, shower, and shine. Only you can't shine stickums.

The usual good breakfast followed, the reader on the dais delivering some stuff from the *Diamond Sutra* I didn't understand at all. "*These 'living beings,' so called, are not really living beings at all. Such is only a word.*"

In context, that gave me a bit of a shiver.

I had my interview with the CM right after breakfast. It was at best painful, since I viewed him as an abettor of criminals and he viewed me as a failure at my job.

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"Maybe it would have been better," he began grimly, "if Security hadn't sent us someone quite so *old*."

Setting the tone of confrontation early. He hadn't asked me to sit down, so for once I was able to stare down at him, at his tawny locks, the ginger fur on the backs of his big hands. I could've told him that I was completing my theory of the case. That I knew the guilty party. That with his backing, I could probably gather the evidence I needed, and go on home.

Right. The very suggestion that I might be thinking of arresting the most important of all his Very Important Guests would've caused an explosion fit to knock Heaven's Footstool right out of orbit. Besides, I was enraged by having to work for and with this sleazy criminal. So instead of asking for help, I went for his jugular.

"Why didn't your Reverence tell me you suspect a conspiracy? Did you send to Terra because Ion couldn't find out anything useful, you needed help and couldn't trust anybody here?"

"I'll ask the questions. I'm in charge here."

"Tell that to your dead dogsbody. There must have been other incidents before Kendo's killing that I don't know about. What were they? When did you first begin to suspect a conspiracy?"

"You know everything you need to know. In fact you know more."

"I know a *lot* more. Years ago I was engaged in hunting Brother Ion, or whatever his real name is, on a murder charge."

That stopped him. He eyed me the way a treed puma eyes a hunting dog. Unlike the dog, I could go after him, only modifying the truth a little to protect the Grande Dame.

"In checking Security's records, I also found out that Brother Kendo's real name is Krovich and that he's a fugitive on a fraud charge. Just how many of these characters are you sheltering, your Reverence?"

"I was told — " he said, and snapped his jaws shut.

"That the records had been purged, I suppose. So they were, but not competently. Who's your contact in the archives at Security HQ?"

"This is a sovereign world. You have exactly as much power as I choose to grant you. You're here to investigate a homicide — two homicides now — and turn the guilty party over to me for judgment by the Master. You know, Colonel, I can call eighty-eight monks to my aid at any time, if you force me to deal with you as a new threat."

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"Yes, and I'm sure you will, too, with thirty-three well-heeled guests looking on. Incidentally, you have only eighty-seven monks now, and I'm not by any means sure that all or even most of them are loyal to you. Even when they wear white robes, criminals have a stink all their own."

Our dialogue continued in this friendly fashion for another twenty minutes, after which I turned on my heel and walked out. At any rate, the shouting match cleared the air. He was right that I was bound by my orders and that I had no independent authority. I was right about everything else. So that's just the way it was.

Now, I thought, to look for the help I need.

Sister Jann was already in her office, breakfasting on a chunk of fragrant bread and a cup of milk that she sucked noisily through a straw. She was wide awake, but with a frazzled look. I greeted her and she gestured me into the other chair.

"The tension's starting to get me," she apologized. "I didn't sleep at all."

"Murder has that effect," I told her. "As Shakespeare did *not* say, murder doth murder sleep."

She smiled wanly. "I checked Ion's body last night. Under the robe, he's one of the hairiest specimens I've ever seen. A kind of ape man. Maybe a double-Y-chromosome freak. But I was too tired to run his DNA and see. Oh, one thing. On his left shoulder he had the tattoo of a rat."

"Standard. That's the ancient symbol of the Ninja. Hijacked by modern thugs to give themselves a distinguished pedigree. Any other surprises?"

"Not really. When the airlock's outer door opened, there must have been a catastrophic drop in pressure, but he froze solid so quickly his tissues didn't have time to rupture. There was no external sign of trauma whatever. He wasn't forced into the lock."

"Of course he wasn't," I said impatiently. "He was lured in. Somebody said, 'You go in first, I'll be there in a minute, just go in and shut the door. Get yourself in the mood. When I'm ready I'll knock.' Tell me something — is the airlock often used for sex?"

She sighed. Polished off her milk. "The answer is yes. It's hard to find privacy here — anybody's cell can be opened at any time on the CM's orders. So couples aiming at a quickie go into the airlock and push the

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button that seals the inner door. There's enough air and warmth to give them half an hour or so to do whatever they've got in mind. Outside a warning light starts flashing, and when people see it they grin and chuckle. It's an open secret, the kind that everybody knows and nobody talks about."

"How's the outer door opened?"

"The control's on the bulkhead just beyond the metal detector. It won't work until the inner door is sealed. Two people have to cooperate to open the airlock, one inside and one outside. The system's intended as a fail-safe, to prevent accidents and suicides."

"A fail-safe that failed."

"Clearly."

Time for me to make my pitch. "Look, Sister. I've gotten to trust you. And I need your help."

She smiled a little, folded her hands. She had hands like Anna's, small but competent, clean blunt nails, no jewelry, no lacquer. I had the feeling she'd been waiting for me to speak out.

"Well, Colonel, I've gotten to trust you, too. And I'll help any way I can. Could I first ask why you've decided that I am, as the ancient Americans used to say, okay?"

"You were right from the beginning about the CM. I know that now. In fact, he's even worse than you thought."

Briefly I filled her in about Kendo, about Ion, about the CM's racket. She wasn't as surprised as I expected she'd be. Just listened carefully and nodded.

"There's a kind of in-group of dubious characters surrounding him," she said. "The brothers and sisters call them the Pack. They aren't real monks, anybody can tell that. Trouble is, our robes and our rules of silence make anonymity so easy here, and monastic discipline makes questioning authority so hard."

"How many in the Pack?"

"Maybe a dozen in all. Ironically, poor Kendo wasn't one of them. Maybe he was too nonviolent to be useful. But now I do understand why the CM didn't give him a job in the treasurer's office."

To my astonishment, her gray eyes filled with tears, the first I'd seen her shed.

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"Sometimes I felt so sorry for him. Isolated among religious people whose viewpoint he couldn't share and criminals who were so much worse than he was."

"Yeah, it's too bad," I muttered, not really meaning it, because I didn't care about Brother Kendo one way or the other. "Now, Sister, what I really need right now is — "

She wiped the tears and started to say at the same time, "What I think you need right now is — "

And we both finished together. "*To meet the Master.*"

AS WE ENTERED Spoke Seven, she whispered the news that seeing Master Po wouldn't be easy for me. He was the CM's prisoner, and had been for over a year.

"He's watched all the time. The CM used to spy on him through the monitoring system, and Brother Ion practically camped outside his door. A guard bot's stationed inside the Master's quarters, partly as his servant and partly as his keeper. It's not armed, but it's physically powerful and its command port has been sealed, so it can't be reprogrammed. "

"How do you get in?"

"The CM wants Master Po alive for a while longer as a front for his schemes. So I'm permitted to check on his health. As soon as I understood the situation, I became his ally and his channel to the outside. After the monitoring system went down, the Master and I began talking to each other in indirect language, quoting haiku with a word or two changed — devices like that. Things the bot's brain is too rigid to catch."

Things were starting to connect up. "Were you the one who disabled the monitoring system?"

"Yes. We couldn't have the CM watching us. He'd have understood in a second what we were up to. All I did was cut the main optical cable. The whole thing's so old — late twenty-first century — that I thought a breakdown would seem quite natural. But the CM's paranoid, so he decided it must be part of a plot. And of course he was right. Well, you know, paranoid people have real enemies."

Spoke Seven contained the usual line of anonymous doorways. She paused at one, opened it quickly and checked inside. Then beckoned.

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"Wait here," she whispered. "The Master's cell is just across the corridor. He and I have a signal worked out. When I say '*satori*,' he'll feign an attack — his blood pressure's low, sometimes he goes into syncope — and I'll send the bot to fetch adrenaline. It's programmed to respond to medical crises, so I think it'll obey. The errand will only take it a few minutes, so you have to be in and out before it comes back. But you'll have time to meet the Master and let him know he has a new ally."

The door slid shut. I was in a cell much like my own, except for the lack of civilian clothes and two clean habits hanging from hooks in the clothes rack, their hems clipped to a bar below to hold them straight. The desk had been turned into an altar, with statues of Jesus, Buddha, and the Goddess of Mercy. A picture of a many-armed smiling god had been taped to the bulkhead above and a teaspoonful of charred incense still smoked faintly in a covered burner. Whoever lived there had a Hindu background and thought that all embodiments of compassion were avatars of Vishnu. I was surprised he missed Mother Teresa who, I understood, had become a goddess with her own temple in New Calcutta.

I put my ear to the door and listened. "Yes, it's me," said Sister Jann's voice. She was speaking louder than usual to make sure I heard.

A bot's unmistakable flat tones answered, though I couldn't distinguish the words.

"I know it's not the usual day....No, no one came with me....Well, if you think you heard an extra pair of footsteps, you're wrong — "

Atonal voice again. Goddamn bots anyway, you never knew how acute their sensory equipment was until too late. I barely had time to step between the white robes in the rack when the door opened. Smell of heated metal. It was a little guy, about a meter ten. It rolled on sticky tires into the room. Sounded like an irritated snake.

I stepped out, hit the back of its "head" — the sensory center — with the edge of my right hand. The shock sent an aluminum plate flying and exposed a nest of glassy cables inside. I reached in and tore out a bunch. I didn't care what they did — they must have done something essential.

The bot started off on one wheel, whirled, flipped over and started spinning around the deck. I slipped out, letting the door close behind me. Sister Jann was holding the door across the hall open and I slid into the Master's quarters.

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"I have more than a few minutes now," I told her.

"What about the bot?"

"Forget the bot."

The Master, like Mmahat, lived in a suite. The main room was austere, with no chair, no desk, only tatami mats glued to the deck and a low Japanese table or two. On one wall hung a scroll with a black-and-white Zen drawing of their prophet Bodhidharma, a ferocious-looking old gent with bulging eyes. A Japanese verse ran vertically beside the picture.

"Do you read *kanji*?" asked a creaking voice like a cricket's song.

"Sorry, no."

"It says, *What's the sound of one hand clapping*? Do you know what the koan means?"

The day before I'd have said no, and gotten irritated to boot with what used to sound like gibberish. Today I said, "Possibly."

He chuckled. "Well, that's a beginning. Tea?"

Master Po looked like a cicada shell — small, elaborately wrinkled, dry and brown. His eyes twinkled like black diamonds. He sat on the deck cross-legged behind the Japanese table, and at his gesture I settled down facing him. Sister Jann brought cups covered with plastic, with straws inserted through nipples.

"I don't usually serve menfolk," she explained. "But I make an exception for Masters and guys who fight bots and win."

We toasted each other with green tea while she and the Master exchanged amused glances. He treated her as an equal with whom he shared some sort of secret joke.

"So you've come up from Terra to examine our dirty laundry," the Master said. His tiny, ancient voice scraped, squeaked, and whispered, but was perfectly clear.

"Not my own doing, Master Po. Now, you won't have heard yet about the murder of so-called Brother Ion — "

"So it's happened, eh? And Sister just told me you've discovered Brother Aung Chai's little game."

"Yes."

"He was my worst mistake," sighed Master Po. "One of the Christian holy books warns against false prophets so sly they can deceive even the Chosen Ones. Well, I'm not sure I'm a Chosen One, but I know that he

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deceived me. What's enlightenment but the discovery of our oneness with all beings? Once confirmed in it, we pursue right action naturally, like Jesus when he discarded the laws and the prophets for his gospel of love. But what if someone went only halfway? What if someone learned just enough to despise conventional morality without truly entering the enlightened state? He'd be a kind of walking cancer, you see, with no law and no love either."

"And that's the Chief Monk."

The Master nodded. "His schemes don't end with enriching himself. He means to leave the Order, return to Terra, and get himself into the Council of State with the aid of that pompous ass Mmahat. He's got brains, forcefulness, a legion of rich supporters, an unearned reputation for being holy, and a genuinely mesmeric personality. So you see why we had to stop him."

"Shutting down his spy system was the first step," said Sister Jann, taking up the tale. "Then we had to kill his enforcer."

"*We*?" I gazed at the old gent, now well into his second century, and the serene-looking nun, over whose pale face a delicate blush was beginning to spread.

"Well, I did at his command. It was very, very difficult for me to do. But for the sake of true religion we have to overthrow Aung Chai and restore the Master to rule and guide us."

I felt like a man who'd just taken one of those banana-peel pratfalls you see in ancient comedies. Why did I think, in this of all places, that the motive had to be something practical, something worldly?

"What about Kendo?" I demanded, with anger directly proportional to my embarrassment over my blunder. "Did you kill him, too?"

The delicate pink darkened to rose on her pale cheeks. "I made a mistake. A terrible mistake. I was quite anxious anyway, I'd never tried to kill anybody before, and with the dim lights and so forth I thought I'd spotted Brother Ion. But I got the wrong man. It was terribly distressing."

"Especially for Kendo. Poor guy, hiding from a measly fraud charge, and first he loses all his money and then he gets stabbed by a nun. Where'd the knife come from?"

"It was a sample from a medical-supply outfit on Terra. It came in a miscellaneous shipment of new equipment and went through the

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scanners unnoticed. A disposable scalpel made of mirror duroplast, not steel, and sharp as an obsidian blade. After I...used it, I dropped it into a waste-materials vent. We've got kilometers of solar panels on the station's exterior and they generate huge amounts of energy. Well, mirror duroplast's got a relatively low melting point, only 550 degrees, so the knife was gone forever. Of course I'd worn gloves, and I threw them in, too. A tiny drop of blood got on the sleeve of my habit, but I was the one doing the neoluminol studies, so that didn't matter."

The Master waved a small, dry, clawlike hand. "Try not to be so conventional, Colonel. One death was a tragic accident, the other a well-merited execution. What matters is that Aung Chai's enforcer has been removed by Sister Jann. Now I understand you've eliminated his bot as well. Next step: the man himself."

"Perhaps," I murmured, "Sister Jann can lure him into the airlock, as she did Brother Ion."

She looked like I'd slapped her. "Maybe I deserved that," she whispered. "It *was* rather a vile thing to do, exploiting his lust. But I simply couldn't think of anything else. He was a professional killer, as you know, and after Kendo's death he was on his guard."

"Did the fact that you're a nun bother him?"

"I think it excited him," she said slowly. "Like Nero wanting to rape a vestal virgin. And he was bored with his usual prey, these foolish females who are our guests. He not only pursued them himself, he pimped for the Chief Monk, who surely is Rasputin reborn."

Master Po raised his teacup, but suddenly halted the gesture and spoke out.

"Enough talk! We must purge Heaven's Footstool and return it to right practice and the true path! I order the Chief Monk to be deprived of the place he has dishonored. Arrest him, bind him, hold him for an open trial before all the brothers and sisters."

He sucked his tea down to the last drop. His hand descended and the cup rapped the table like the gavel of a hanging judge. I stared at him with exasperation and awe, thinking: *A man who can put death and damnation into a teacup needs watching.*

"Aung Chai is no ordinary man," the cricket voice resumed. "He's as big as you are and several decades younger. He recognizes no law but his

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own ego. Like the tyrant Hitler in the ancient world, he possesses the demonic power of alienation — because he cares for nothing, he's capable of anything. And he will be aided by the criminals he's brought here, for their survival depends on his.

"You must operate under difficult constraints. We have many friends among the brothers, who could make a good fight of it. Yet we can't afford a bloodbath. Nor can Aung Chai. For him it would be a political disaster. For us, it would shame the Order and make the White Monks infamous. The Chief Monk must be removed suddenly, as if struck by a thunderbolt. I can't compel you to aid us, Colonel, but it's the only way you can carry out your obvious duty to eliminate a refuge for Terra's felons. Once Aung Chai is gone, you can return home with a shuttlecraft full of scoundrels for whom there are outstanding warrants. You'll be a hero down there."

I smiled a little ruefully. Nothing was working out as I expected. First I got the wrong man in my sights. Then I found out that my ally, the good sister, did the killing. Now I was being invited to lead a *coup d'état* for the sake of true religion.

And it looked like I'd have to. That nest of felons did need cleaning out, and this was the only way to do it. Master Po was a hundred and twenty-eight, and on Earth would have weighed maybe fifty kilos, but he had me in the mental equivalent of a headlock.

"Master," I asked, "in your younger days, did you practice judo?"

"Yes, and was quite good at it. I could throw a man twice my own size."

"That's easy to be — "

But I didn't have time to get out "believe." The door slid open behind me and I turned to find the gap overfilled by the Reverend Aung Chai, with four chunky spooks behind him.

"So there's a transmitter in the bot," I remarked, "and it sounded a silent alarm."

He and his friends entered the room, pushing back their hoods, Regulation 19 or no Regulation 19. With a sinking sensation I recognized three of his spooks from times and crimes past. Killers, armed robbers, brutes. Speaking religiously, an Unholy Trinity — and I felt sure the fourth was no better than the ones I knew.

* * *

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A few minutes later I was sitting on the deck, back against a bulkhead, ankles tied together, knees under my chin, wrists tied behind me — the only one they bothered to tie up, which I suppose was a compliment of sorts. Sister Jann sat to my left, Master Po at my right. He was in the meditation position, hands against his *hara*, back ramrod straight, face composed and eyes cast down. He seemed to be ignoring the enemy whose career he launched and now had failed to stop.

My omni reposed in the CM's left sleeve, where it continued to pick up our voices and the messages emanating silently from the chip in my larynx.

The CM was not a generous winner. "For you, the airlock," he told me. "Later, when our honored guests are asleep. You're nothing but a retired cop with a blot on your record, so I don't imagine the accident will cause much stink on Terra."

He smiled at Sister Jann, exposing his long teeth. She'd been his nemesis, and he acted accordingly. "She's yours," he told one of his followers, a short thick individual with a scar-seamed dark face and arms longer than his legs.

His name floated across my mind — Sirathan Radhakrishnan, an up-to-date thug and devotee of skull-garlanded Kali, who made himself quite a career in the international settlement at New Angkor, killing for pay and disposing of the bodies in the fish farms that dot the big lake of the Tonle Sap. He'd been missing three or four years. Now he grinned, bent down, grabbed Sister Jann and swung her over his shoulder with one smooth motion. He'd had a lot of practice moving bodies, though not live ones. Sirathan stepped into the Master's bedroom and the door slid shut behind him.

I asked Aung Chai, "Did you have to do that?"

"Yes. I want her to suffer, and if I know the gentleman she's with, she will." He gave me his ferocious smile.

I try not to act in anger, you do dumb things that way, but at this point I just let go. What did I have to lose, anyway?

In standard gravity I'd have had a hard time moving. As it was, I pushed down hard with my heels and the equal and opposite reaction brought me halfway to my feet. Another hard kick pulled my stickums off the deck and sent me into a graceful arc, like a slow rocket, against the

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Chief Monk's face and chest. I had only one available weapon, so I used it. I got my teeth into his throat and bit down on the windpipe as hard as I could, trying to strangle him.

Christ, it was like getting a mouthful of brambles. He made a gargling noise. Hands grabbed at me, trying to pull me off while I made like a bulldog, now tasting the salt in his goddamn blood. Then a heavy fist thumped the back of my neck and I saw stars and flashes. They yanked up on my bound hands and pain shot up through my shoulders and when I gasped they pulled me loose from the CM.

I twisted and turned like a gaffed eel in midair, folded up my legs and kicked as hard as I could. My feet sank into somebody's gut, then rattled somebody else's ribs and I heard a bone crack, or maybe two bones. There was yelling and curses as I broke loose and launched myself off a bulkhead at the CM and hit him in the belly with my hard, hard head. This time he was knocked loose from the deck and caromed off another bulkhead and came back at me.

His neck was bleeding, his thumbs were extended, he wanted my eyes, and when the others grabbed my arms again I was beginning to think he'd get them. Then Master Po hurled his frail body against Aung Chai. Did no damage, but deflected him for a few seconds, during which one of my captors screamed, doubled up, turned me loose and made a slow, elegant somersault while droplets of bright arterial blood sprayed, spread, and drifted in midair. That's when I realized that Sister Jann had joined the melee. She was holding something like a gleaming shard of mirror. She clutched my hand and ducked behind my back and I felt the blade slide through the cords binding my wrists like a butcher's knife slicing the tendons of a chicken. She stabbed another of my assailants in a motion so practiced and quick the gleaming blade vanished and reappeared almost in the same instant, only not as bright as before.

I went for the CM once again, this time with hands free and with lethal intent. But my feet were still tied and we fell all in a heap together, not against the deck but against a bulkhead — so far we'd bounced off all four — then up against the ceiling. But he'd had enough, he pushed me off, and he and his remaining bully tumbled through the doorway and disappeared.

This strange underwater ballet of a brawl was over. Sister Jann and I

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were left bobbing around the room like corks, along with two bodies, one groaning, one not. As we reconnected with the deck, Master Po began clapping his ancient hands. "How splendid!" he exclaimed. "How splendid!"

I bent down and freed my feet. Recovered my omni, which had escaped Aung Chai's sleeve at some point and was floating in midair. I was still trying to get my breath; the CM's pals had almost dislocated my shoulders and I felt pretty battered. I foresaw a painful awakening next morning, but at least I would awaken.

I pointed at Sister Jann's knife and gasped, "So there were two samples in that shipment?"

Apologetically she smiled. "Yes. I hid this one inside Brother Kendo's body when I was doing his autopsy. After the search was over, I recovered it. Given the situation, I thought I'd better go armed." She used her sleeve to wipe the CM's loathsome blood off my face. I had to grin. This was not a lady I'd ever think about romantically, even if she were so inclined. But as an ally she was worth her weight in something a good deal more valuable than gold. I reflected that virgins in ancient myth were often pretty ferocious, like Athena and Brunnhilde, filled with magical power because they'd never learned either to love or fear men.

"Where's the would-be rapist?" I inquired when she'd cleaned me up a bit.

She sighed, saddened by the things she'd had to do. "In the bedroom. I left him spinning in an eddy of red fog. What a fool, throwing me over his shoulder that way. I had the knife in my left sleeve and when the bedroom door shut I pulled it, twisted around and slashed his carotid artery. To think I'm a doctor and a nun, and here I've killed four men."

She glanced at the body that was groaning, but had now stopped. "Maybe five."

"Don't fall into the absurdity of regretting necessary actions," piped up Master Po. "There's still much work to be done. And it will be dangerous work."

"More dangerous than this?" I asked, gesturing at the casualties.

"Possibly. He underestimated us before. He won't again. We haven't yet seen the worst these people can do."

"Then we'd better be going."

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I picked up Master Po. In this near-weightless world, with only an occasional gentle nudge he floated, the mythical Levitating Master come to life. All I really had to do was steer him. We hastened into the corridor, and the door whispered shut behind us.

WE DIDN'T KNOW where the Chief Monk was, or what he was doing, but we could all guess without any trouble. He was in his lair, summoning whatever remained of his gang. They would wait for lights-out tonight and come hunting us, scouring the rings and spokes one by one. We needed help, needed it quick, and I didn't have to think twice to know where to find it.

We hustled on down to B Ring where the Honored Guests resided, and I knocked on Death's door (!). Gladiator Rhee, otherwise known as Huksa Byung, opened up, stared in astonishment at the floating Master, then invited us in with a deep bow.

"Ah, my son," piped up Master Po, "we come to ask you for aid, and may joy and good fortune light upon you and your house if you give it to us."

"For you, Master, anything," he said. "But what — ?"

Briefly I put him in the picture. A simplified version, of course: the Chief Monk had turned traitor and wanted to kill the Master in order to take his place. Black Death showed no surprise at hearing this.

"Sounds like home," he nodded. "In the whole history of Korea, whenever we weren't being invaded by foreigners, we were having palace revolts. I pray," he added to the Master, "that you will enroll me under your banner."

"With pleasure. And now," he said, "may I visit your bathroom, Honored Champion Rhee? I've drunk a great deal of tea, and the bladders of the very old are notoriously weak."

While we waited for the Master to reappear, I asked our new ally what usually happened to palace rebels in old Korea.

"If a rebel won, he became emperor. If he lost, he perished by the Slow Death."

"Which meant?"

"They started at the tip of his left little finger, and shortened him by one joint every day."

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"Olden days, golden days."

Master Po returned, smiling blissfully. "I used to preach a sermon on the religious significance of urination," he said. "As with all of life, one must learn some conscious control, but ultimately one must yield to nature, and it's in the yielding that one finds pleasure and relief. Now, if you young people will hear an old man's advice, I have a few ideas to suggest. While I was a prisoner I had plenty of time to think, you see."

Briefly the old gent outlined his plan, which began with seizing the Hub and getting control of the machinery. Shrewd and sensible. I told him, "All the years of my life I've underestimated sainthood."

"I'm not a saint. I belong to a different tradition, which honors the sage. The saint tries to rise above nature. The sage tries only to embody it."

"*The sage too is without pity*," I quoted. "*He burns the families of men like straw dogs.*"

"But only when it's necessary," he pointed out. "Our real mission is to save, but everywhere positive and negative are so closely interwoven that sometimes we must destroy in order to save. Shall we go?"

"Stay here," Black Death commanded Sister Jann. "They're all afraid of me. You'll be safe in my quarters."

"No, no," murmured the Master. "She goes with us."

He looked a bit baffled by that. "Surely Sister isn't a warrior?"

"You might be surprised," I said, and quoted one of Anna's favorite lines from Lao-tzu. "*Soft weakness overcomes hard strength. This is called the Dark Illumination.*"

"You see," said Po dryly, "he has a quote for everything. One of these days he may begin to speak for himself."

We let the door close behind us. The spoke was empty; somewhere I heard faint sounds of chanting, but that was all. We set off accompanied by the patter, patter of our sticky boots. I was curious about how we were supposed to carry out the first phase of the plan.

"When you sabotaged the monitors," I asked Sister, "how'd you get into the Hub?"

"Couldn't. The lock's an antique with a sensor that reads fingerprints, if you can believe that. Antique but, I might add, very effective. A year or two back they hired an expert from a museum of technology, who

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set it to recognize only the CM and Brother Ion. And you have to be *inside* the Hub to reset it. You have to be inside to get inside."

"Then how — "

"It was easy enough. I came down here in the middle of the night. A Ring's separated from the Hub only by a circular corridor. I started unbolting wall panels until I found where the main cable comes out."

"So how do we get in now?"

"Think it over, Colonel. I'm sure you'll realize there's an easy way — oh, oh."

We heard an unmistakable bass voice, and it wasn't chanting *Aum*. We crowded into a handy cell.

Somebody with a Jewish background lived here — I recognized the nine-branched Hannukah menorah. Surrounded by all these symbols of faith, I wondered if I'd missed something critical in human life by coming from a family that hadn't been observant for a couple of hundred years.

Well, no time for that now.

Somebody, two somebodies, no three, no four, were shuffling past. Aung Chai was trying to keep his voice down, but it was hard to do when his bass-fiddle tones made our teeth vibrate. I had no trouble detecting the word *Hub*. Sister Jann caught my eye and shrugged.

"He's very bright, you know," she whispered.

Damn true. He'd realized the importance of the Hub and he didn't want to trust entirely to the lock. Wondering how many guards he'd assign there, and where they'd be posted, I dropped to my knees, opened the door a crack, and got one eye looking down the spoke to the corridor that circles the Hub. One guard there. No, two. And here was another complication. The first guard was carrying a long-barreled pistol, a four-point-nine impact weapon, to be precise.

So it was no more Mr. Nice Guy. The CM had broken out the hardware. Now I saw why he banned weapons — so he could monopolize them.

The second guard was idly slamming one fist into another. Cracking sound. Making sure his brass knucks were comfy on his hand, I supposed. The two met, mumbled to each other, then slouched off together, out of my line of vision.

Briefly I paused to do some arithmetic. If Sister Jann was right about

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Aung Chai having a dozen criminals in his Pack, and if she'd killed five — *five!* I still couldn't quite believe it — and if three were assigned to the Hub, that left the CM and no more than four others to form the search party after lights-out. Our forces consisted of one aging cop, one gladiator, one lady with a blade, and one hundred-and-twenty-three-year-old with a lion's heart and a dead cicada's body.

I pulled back inside, let the door close. "Master," I said humbly, "this will take strategy. I ask your advice." Which he proceeded to give, concisely.

"So it'll be you, me, and Huksa Byung?"

"Yes. But Sister Jann will accompany you to the kitchen, for she has a duty, too. Now move quickly, children! The time of the Great Meditation is approaching. The CM has to preside or everybody will know something's seriously wrong. But he'll make the ceremony as brief as possible. The evening meal's always a snack, and he may well advance the usual hour of lights out on some excuse or other. Once the monks and guests are in their cells, the hunt will begin. Meantime we have our window of opportunity."

I checked the empty corridor again, slipped out with Sister Jann following. This close to the Hub the spokes were close together and we took only a few seconds to cross to the next one. Glanced down it, saw nobody, hurried to the kitchen and slipped inside. Empty and sterile; stillness of polished metal, ceramic tiles on bulkheads and deck, well-scrubbed sinks and a long, antique hotspot range scoured clean as a Zen temple. Leftovers for the evening meal laid out in covered dishes, each held down by a magnet in the base.

While she hastened to the freezer, I cracked a door leading to the circular corridor that surrounded the Hub. Heard the low tearing-paper sounds of stickums on the carpeting as the guards approached, completing their circuit. The curvature meant they could only see a bit of the corridor at any one time. Mr. Death now was giving Master Po a gentle shove and stepping back out of their line of vision. Meantime I waited, hoping I wouldn't hear the short dry cough that is the only sound an impact pistol makes.

"What the hell?" somebody said, and I stepped out behind the guards, who were staring dumbfounded at the Master floating toward them in midair, palms pressed together, eyes cast down, looking as if he traveled like this all the time.

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I lunged, hoping to chop the guy with the pistol at the base of the neck, but he heard my stickums and whirled around. So instead I whacked him on the inside of the elbow, aiming for the ulnar nerve. The gun went flying and he jabbed at my throat with his left hand, but I let that go past and slammed into him with my shoulder. His boots popped free of the deck and he flew backward and bumped his pal's back.

The second goon turned, and he wasn't wearing brass knucks, he had a cestus on his right hand. It was equipment for the really nasty Absolute Combat bouts, the closed-circuit snuff shows where the sole aim was maximum butchery and blood. The Romans made cesti out of leather, but this one was the ubiquitous duroplast with studs designed to mutilate.

The gun had floated out of reach, so I assumed the position for combat. Then shrugged and turned my back. Unseen by either thug, Mr. Death had arrived on the scene. Like a true gladiator, he gave fair warning.

"Guard yourself," he said.

I took maybe half a minute catching the gun, pressing the recognition stud, and waiting for it to learn the pattern of micro-bloodvessels in my thumb. (Otherwise it wouldn't fire.) So I didn't see what happened to the goons, but when I turned back, the guy with the cestus was down, with Black Death's foot on his chest, and the first guy was trying to get away, scrabbling his way along the ceiling like an escaping cockroach. I felt embarrassed to shoot him in flight, but that didn't stop me from touching the firing stud. The bullet exploded inside him, he popped like a tick, and drifted on slowly, leaving a crimson jet trail behind.

The champ looked around, as if expecting a referee to declare the match over. Then removed his foot and touched the body of his late adversary gently with the toe of his boot.

"Ah well," he sighed. "Another tablet for the temple."

I noticed that the guy who'd had the gun didn't qualify for the brotherhood of warriors. I knew him, by the way — another killer in the CM's remarkable collection. So this too was what the Master called a well-merited execution, not that I cared a great deal whether it was well-merited or not.

We were still looking over the battlefield when Sister Jann reappeared. She was guiding the Master back to us with one hand, while carrying a gray object in the other.

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"Ready?" she asked, and without waiting for an answer she shoved Brother Ion's severed right hand into the sensor and the door to the Hub purred open.

The first firefight of the season followed. We heard two short coughs inside and two impact rounds exploded against the corridor's outer bulkhead. You don't think much under those circumstances, so I shoved my weapon around the jamb and tapped the firing stud three times, producing sounds of disintegration, human and mechanical.

Somewhere a shrill alarm bell began ringing.

I edged one eye into the opening, and yes, I got the third guard, but also some equipment I hoped wasn't absolutely essential to our survival. Entered cautiously, leading the way, wondering if a fourth killer could be hidden somewhere. But this was the command center, all controls and dials laid out in a circle. It was like a clam; once it opened you saw the whole inside.

The door closed automatically behind us, shutting off the noise of the alarm bell. Sister Jann approached the dead body, but she wasn't looking at it — in fact, looking at it wouldn't have yielded much information, since one of my rounds happened to hit the face. She was staring instead at the damage done by my second and third shots to the console behind the body. One had torn a big hole. The next had gone straight through into a complicated maze of printed circuits.

I began to get a sinking feeling, confirmed when Sister Jann murmured inadequately, "Oh, dear."

"What'd I do?"

"I'm no engineer, but judging by what's left of these dials, I rather think you've wrecked the temperature regulating system. With the solar panels continuing to pour in power, this station's going to have what amounts to a heat stroke."

She moved down a row of undamaged dials, muttering, "Now where's the thermal register — ah. It's slightly elevated already, about a tenth of a degree. I'd guess that within a day the heat buildup will reach uncomfortable levels. Then rapidly become unbearable. Eventually all the circuitry will fry, including the computers that maintain the station's attitude and keep it in a stable orbit. Then Heaven's Footstool will start to wobble, the orbit will decay, and — "

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"I think," piped up Master Po, "that we had better conclude our business here sooner rather than later."

We tumbled into the corridor, scooted up the nearest spoke and popped into an empty cell. It belonged to the guy with the images of compassion. We were barely in time. Voices muttered in the ring we'd just left, including that unmistakable bass. Responding to the alarm, they were finding the corpses, the wreckage. A scream rose, a horrible long-drawn-out scream not of fear but of pure rage — the scream of a dying puma that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

I edged into the spoke again, every sense straining, followed by our gladiator. One thug stood outside the door to the Hub, gun in hand. The others must have gone inside to view the catastrophe. I checked the little window on the back of my own weapon to see how many shots I had left. Exactly one, and if I missed — Then Black Death intervened. With the speed only a pro can manage, he fell and rolled into the corridor. The guard whirled around and his gun coughed, but now the Champ was taking advantage of the curvature, he was out of sight and the guard — who couldn't have caught more than a glimpse of somebody in motion — went after him. His mistake.

By the time Black Death returned, I'd discarded my empty weapon and was pressing the recognition stud on the guard's. Softly it beeped at me, and then I used it to destroy the sensor on the door to the Hub. Was there a manual override so the CM could get out again? If so, I figured to give him a greeting he wouldn't forget.

The door remained shut, though we heard muffled thumping against the inside.

Sister Jann and the Master joined us. A Ring looked like the last act of *Hamlet*, except that the bodies were floating instead of lying around in heaps. Incidentally, the pseudograv wasn't totally dead, because over time the bodies drifted very slowly downward, like drowned mariners in a very salty sea. Droplets of their blood formed perfect, glistening spheres and for some reason seemed to follow the men they once helped to animate, like the tails of comets.

I said, "I'll stay on guard here, just to make sure nobody escapes. You go ahead, and — "

"Oh no," said Master Po, positively, shaking his head. "No, no. Our

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brother, Honored Champion Rhee, will do the guard duty. From you, Honored Colonel, I still have one final favor to ask."

I suppose I was looking stupid, for he said, as if that explained everything, "You see, it's the hour of the Great Meditation. They're waiting for the CM and me, all the monks, the real monks I mean. The nuns. The guests. And we must not disappoint them."

So it happened that a few minutes after the slaughter, I entered the amphitheater with Master Po on my arm. My white robe enfolded me, the hood hid my face. I deposited him on his throne and sat down at his feet. He cleared his throat and in that dry, crisp little cricket voice that somehow reached the back of the hall with perfect clarity, made his announcement.

"Brothers and sisters, honored guests, I have sad news to communicate to you. I'm sure you've heard an alarm bell ringing and an outcry of grief. As you know, Heaven's Footstool is very old, as orbital stations go. When I was born, it had already been serving humankind for almost a hundred years. We now have unquestionable evidence that its orbit is at last decaying. Soon this station must plunge into the atmosphere and be consumed.

"Instead of grieving further, let us be grateful in our hearts that we have had this exceptional place so long. When the shuttle arrives tomorrow, our honored guests will be the first to board, then the brothers and sisters. The Chief Monk and I will go last of all. That is as it should be.

"Now I call upon the Chief Monk to lead us for our last devotions in Heaven's Footstool."

The lights vanished. Again we were in the primal darkness from which being somehow distills itself — either spontaneously, *wu-wei*, as the scientists and the Taoists claim, or at the word of some sort of Ever-Living One, as the various faiths begotten by my people avow. Deepening my voice, trying for the orotund periods of the Reverend Aung Chai, I declared:

"Thus, my brothers and sisters, do all things begin. This is the original state, the abyss without form and without mode of the waste and wild divinity. And then the light appears."

* * *

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In Manypalms Oasis, I spent the first night back beside my wife Anna, hoping never to rest anywhere else until I rested for good. I even welcomed the burden of my own recovered weight, pressing me down, nailing me to the bed.

We got up early, because there was a sight we wanted to see. While showering — my own shower, no vacuum plumbing, water plunging downward the way it was supposed to — I decided to write this narrative. Yeah, I turned in the customary formal report to HQ, with numbered paragraphs, all the customary bureaucratic boilerplate. But it was full of uncomfortable truths, and by the time it sees light outside the Security Forces, I know goddamn well it will have been transformed into something rich and strange. HQ isn't about to admit publicly that some of its own people were up to their armpits in the CM's racket.

By contrast, this account is taken direct from the omni I carried, the one that recorded it all, including the times when I made a fool of myself. I intend to file it, along with the memory cube, someplace safe — *not* in the archives of the Security Forces.

After a gulp of coffee, Anna and I set out walking along the edge of the desert, holding hands like young lovers. The sun hadn't yet appeared. The sky was a perfect pale fluorescent blue, the coming day a fiery serpent along the horizon's rim. The bulk of the Mountain Lion reared up to our right; cacti spotted the barrenness, otherworldly shapes that ranged from bristling spheres to long, thin Giacometti sculptures. That was when she chose to ask a question she'd carefully avoided until I'd had a chance to rest and unwind.

"Was the last night in orbit pretty bad?" she wanted to know. "When I first saw you I thought, oh great Tao, he looks like he's been through another Planet Bela."

I took a deep breath, knowing it was better to get the whole story out, and only then try to recover.

"It was bad," I admitted. "Not like Bela, but bad enough. The heat built up faster than we expected. When it hit 36°C, everybody was outside their cells, shuffling through the halls, trying to get a breath. Robes were too damn hot, people were half naked, wrapping themselves in wet towels. The bulkheads got hot, the deck got hot, the ceiling got hottest of all. Our prisoners in the Hub turned out all the lights, or maybe they just burned

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out — good thing they couldn't shut off our air supply too, without shutting off their own.

"Emergency lights came on. When the decks got too hot, people took off their stickums and floated in the red dimness like ghosts trailing their shrouds. Councilor Mmahat started having hysterics, so I punched him out. That was satisfying, but really I was just as scared as he was, only hiding it better. I was thinking: if the shuttle doesn't arrive on time, we'll all be steamed like rice."

She shivered. The desert was cold in the morning, but that wasn't the reason. She put an arm around my waist, hand pressing my *hara*, holding me down to Mother Earth.

I told her about the finish. How the supply shuttle arrived on the dot and locked onto Heaven's Footstool. How Sister Jann and I worked the airlock together until the seals hissed open. People jostled forward, only to meet the shuttle captain, who was armed and going the other way. I told him to jettison his cargo, because over a hundred people had to be jammed into the shuttle somehow. He refused, the perfect bureaucrat, because he was responsible for the cargo until it was signed for. So Master Po signed the manifest in *kanji*, which nobody else could read, and only then would the captain agree to dump the cargo so the rescue could proceed. The guests surged through the lock, Mmahat supported by his handmaiden, who seemed to be holding up a lot better than her master. The monks followed.

Last act. Everybody was aboard the shuttle except Black Death and me. He trotted up from A Ring, wearing only a loincloth and his stickums, panting like a dog and sweating rivers. His whole torso was covered with a spiderweb of fine white scars. He told me that our prisoners got the door to the Hub open somehow, and he had to shoot two more of them.

"Aung Chai?" I asked.

"Still inside, I guess. The leader didn't lead. Or he led from the rear." His grin gave me a flash of gold.

"Come aboard, Honored Champion Rhee."

I was following him, the last rat leaving the falling star, when guess who came running in from D Ring? The CM was wild-eyed and wringing wet, and waving a pistol. He spotted me standing just inside the shuttle's loading port and the shuttle's door closing. He knew we'd cut loose in a

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few seconds, and with the airlock open every bubble of air in Heaven's Footstool would rush howling into the void, blowing him with it.

"I'll die!" he shouted. "I'll die!"

"The great weakness of the demonic personality," piped up Master Po's voice at my elbow, "is that it believes in nothing but its own ego. Then how can it face death and the disintegration of the ego?"

Well, I know how the CM faced it. He didn't. After all, I insulted pumas by comparing him to them. He didn't *die* like a lion.

Instead of pumping shots at us in a final gesture of defiance, he ran to the control for the outer door of the airlock and pressed it. It began closing, sealing him inside alive and saving him for an infinitely worse death than being quick-frozen and blown into space. He was willing to be roasted alive in order to live another few minutes, a few hours at most. As some theologians have argued, a demon isn't cast into hell — he makes it for himself.

Meantime the nuclear steel door of the shuttle's port closed with a hiss, clamps clanged loose from the flanges of the airlock, and we began to drift away from Orbital Station One, which had been so many things, a place of learning, a place of prayer, and now had one last role to play — a burning tomb.

"What happened to Master Po?" Anna wanted to know.

"Earth's gravity got him. Or maybe post-traumatic stress. He'd been through a lot, you know. His heart action was weak anyway, and shortly after we landed he passed out — went into syncope, as you medical types say. Sister Jann tried to revive him, but couldn't. I think that devastated her more than anything else. Afterward, she told me she's leaving the White Monks to join the Mother Teresa Guild and spend the rest of her life caring for the dying."

"She does have a tropism for death, doesn't she?" Anna murmured. "Curious.... On a more practical note, what about your pension?"

"I wouldn't start spending the extra money yet. You've seen the news coverage. They're calling me Colonel Albatross because I always seem to be present at disasters. Councilor Mmahat's promoting a temple at New Angkor dedicated to his pal Aung Chai. By the time the official historians get finished, the CM will be the heroic captain who went down with his ship, and I'll just be the dumb cop who destroyed Heaven's Footstool. After all, that's what I did."

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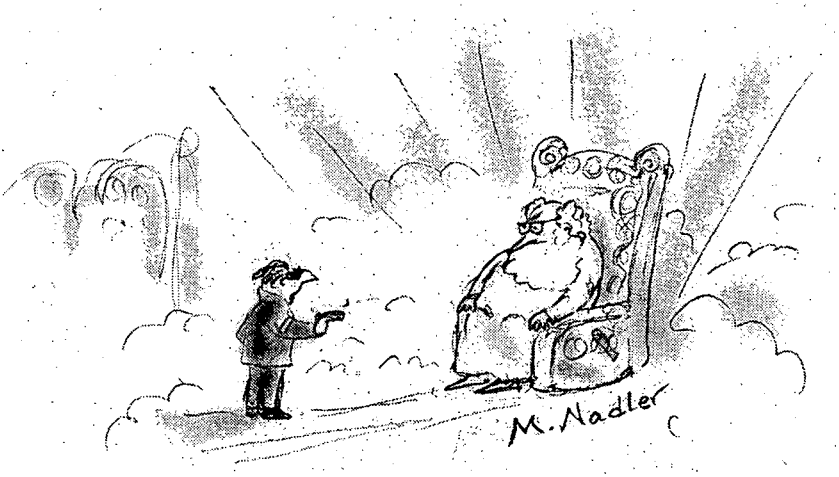
"No, you didn't," she said.

She stamped her size-4 foot on the dusty ground. "*This* is Heaven's Footstool. The real one. And always has been."

She'd told a truth worthy of Lao-tzu. Also she was telling me never to leave it again. I nodded agreement, but then went back to gawking at the sky, as usual. The reason we were out so early was to see a sight announced on last night's news.

"Look," I told her. "Here it comes. Last orbit."

A meteor came flashing out of the dark west. It passed over us toward the fiery east in a long, elegant arc that ended in nothing. Or in Everything — take your pick.



"You know too much."

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

AND THE HOLLYWOOD RATHES OUTGRABE

IT IS WITH ten parts dread to every one part anticipation that science fiction and fantasy fans learn that one of our classic novels or stories is about to be adapted for the big screen. Although we'd love to see our beloved favorite brought to life, we are rightly skeptical of Hollywood's ability (or fortitude) to do the job right.

I could at this point digress into a litany of all the cinematic outrages that we have had to endure. But even if I limited the discussion to the last ten years, my list and blow-by-blow indignation would require a book length treatise. So, instead, I will just skip to a discussion of the adaptation at hand, and that is a reworking of the classic 1943 short story "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" by Lewis Padgett (Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore) into a recent family film entitled *The Last Mimzy*.

Judging from the two titles alone, we can guess that this will not be a particularly faithful adaptation and that some changes will seem irrational and completely unnecessary. For example, in an insult not just to Mr. Kuttner, but also to the great Lewis Carroll — whose "Jabberwocky" provides the original story's title — Mimsy is changed from an adjective to a noun in the movie. And for some unknown flippin' reason the spelling is changed from a "sy" ending to a "zy."

But hold on, my dear readers! If I allow myself to get this nitpicky about this film, even this one review will turn into a book length treatise. So let's move along. At least as far as a brief discussion of the gentlemen behind the movie.

The Last Mimzy is one of those

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movies with a painfully long gestation period. (Usually a bad sign.) The script went through some nineteen drafts by five writers over a twelve-year period. The screenplay credits finally went to the often death-obsessed scribe Bruce Joel Rubin (*Ghost, Jacob's Ladder, My Life, Deep Impact)* and New Line Cinema executive turned scripter *(Frequency)*, Toby Emmerich.

As you might guess, *The Last Mimzy* was released by New Line Cinema, where Mr. Emmerich is currently President of Production. And he isn't the only New Line exec to take a busman's holiday by assuming an actual filmmaker role in one of the studio's movies. In fact, the director of *The Last Mimzy* is none other than New Line co-founder, co-chairman and co-CEO, Bob Shaye.

Although Mr. Shaye is primarily known as a man who knows how to market populist schlock movie franchises like *Nightmare on Elm Street, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Final Destination,* and *Austin Powers* to the masses, he actually started out distributing edgy indie — although equally schlocky — fare like John Waters's *Pink Flamingos* (1972). More recently New Line has released interesting and intelligent features like *A History of Violence* (2005) and *Little Children* (2006) along with the countless dumb and dumber flicks like, you guessed it, *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) and its pale imitator, *Dumb and Dumberer: When Harry Met Lloyd* (2003).

For science fiction fans Mr. Shaye is best known as the man who watched Peter Jackson's pitch reel for a Lord of the Rings two-part movie (which had been rejected by most of Hollywood) and not only gave it a green light, but financed it for a three-film cycle. Riches, Oscars, Litigation, and Blood Feuds followed, in that order.

What does any of this have to do with *The Last Mimzy*? Not a heck of a lot, except to say that film critics sometimes know *too* much about the provenance of a movie going in. That makes us even more jaundiced and suspicious and likely to dismiss a film before we give it a chance. And when it comes to a movie written by committee and directed by a studio head, well, let me just admit that my mind was reeling in horror even before I entered the theater.

That admission over, I'll now say that I was pleasantly surprised by *The Last Mimzy*. Oh, it will outrage any reader requiring a literal rendering of the Padgett story.

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Likewise, the movie's sometimes jarring components are not only indicative of its surfeit of scripters, but also of a corporate mindset that wants to make a movie by recipe (give me some of the government bad guys from *E.T.*, then let's throw in a cute stuffed critter who is much more, like in *A.I.*, etc., etc.)

And yet.... And yet.... If you can turn off the voices that murmur all the reasons there are to dislike this film, you will find that it actually works as entertainment.

Set in modern-day Seattle, *The Last Mimzy* follows a brother and sister a few years older than the original story's tykes. Ten-year-old Noah Wilder (Chris O'Neill) and his five-year-old sister, Emma (Rhiannon Leigh Wryn), seem like normal upper-middle-class kids until they find a mysterious box during an Easter vacation on Whidbey Island. The contents are odd but not totally unfamiliar looking: a green translucent circuit board affair, a shivering blob that looks like a half-filled water balloon, a geode-looking rock that breaks apart, something that looks like a sea shell, and an old-fashioned-looking bunny rabbit doll that Emma immediately adopts and dubs Mimzy.

The children are reluctant to share their discovery with their mother (Joely Richardson) and busy dad (Timothy Hutton) — especially after Mom dismisses one magical toy as a worthless paperweight. As a logical adult, she only sees a small slab of slate, but the children see the magic in these objects, and learn from them.

And we're not just talking about your standard elementary school lessons, either. Before long, both children are showing a talent for telekinesis, and Noah is winning the local science fair with his ability to control spiders and make them work together to build a super-strong tunnel-like web bridge. That bridge design has Noah's hippie science teacher, Larry White (*The Office*'s Rainn Wilson), murmuring words like "genius." He is also blown away by Noah's latest doodles, which are exact copies of Tibetan sacred mandalas that the teacher saw in Nepal — and in his recurring dreams.

When White tells his fiancée, Naomi (*Crossing Jordan*'s Kathryn Hahn), about this, she encourages White and the children's increasingly worried parents to investigate the possibility that one or both children could be a tulku, the reincarnation of a great Buddhist lama.

"What's with all the Tibetan

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folderol?" you may well ask. Surely this is one of the contributions of screenwriter Rubin, who has traveled throughout the Himalayas and is a student and teacher of meditation. How it all actually fits into the main story that links adorable little present-day Earth children with a future civilization looking for desperately needed genetic assistance is more than a little unclear.

Perhaps Mr. Rubin wanted to write off his latest trip as a business expense. In any case, you may rest assured that you will be seeing mandalas everywhere from space wormholes to fields of futuristic posies in this movie. No explanation is ever really offered for any of it, but since the designs are pleasing to the eye, it easy for the viewer to go with the flow and add one more subplot to the disbelief they must actively suspend while *The Last Mimzy* plays itself out.

The mandalas do suit the vaguely new-agey message that the film seems to want to deliver. This includes a not-too-heavy-handed environmental sermon about the dangers of pollution and DNA damage. Then there's the more than a little touchy-feely moral of the story, which seems to be that innocence and childhood purity are both the figurative and literal salvation of the world.

Just don't let the FBI or Homeland Security hear about it. Everything is a terrorist plot to them. The wholesome Wilder family comes under scrutiny after a "generator" the children help form from the space objects blacks out much of Seattle. Soon SWAT teams are raiding the place and the family is hauled off to a research facility by a Homeland Security wonk named Broadman (Michael Clarke Duncan) for interrogation and detention.

I know that it hearkens (a little too obviously) back to *E.T.*, but the Homeland Security subplot is by far and away the weakest aspect of the film. Duncan is unconvincing as a former Justice Department bureaucrat now in charge of the security of the Pacific Northwest. And his investigation of the "toys" the Wilder children found also leads to the most awkward and ludicrous product placement I've seen in a movie in a long time. When scientists do a deep scan of the dear little Mimzy doll, they are dumbfounded by the nanotechnology they find. The doll contains a cyborgian nervous system that is beyond their wildest dreams. But in the middle of one circuit board is the glowing logo of Intel.

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I hope Intel paid a lot for that placement. "Intel Inside" everything eons into the future? From Mimzy's embroidered lips to God's ear, sayeth the company CEO!

By the time we reach the FBI secret lab, we know that the plot is quickly spiraling away from anything resembling the original story. This is a disappointment, but not really surprising.

For all its wonder, the Padgett story is really a tale of horror — at least for adult readers. The fear and dread of the grownups in the story, from the concerned parents to the visiting kiddie shrink, builds to the concluding scene where a bereft father tries to fathom what has just befallen him. Children view a "through the looking glass" escape from parental and social controls differently, but since a truly tidy resolution is never offered, they too might find the story unsettling, if memorable.

It is therefore understandable that Hollywood went for a more conventional happy ending to their version. Fine, I have no problem with a little hyperbolic wonderment FX whiz-bang to conclude our familial story, followed by a golden scene of flying future children at baby Buddha day camp. But was it really necessary that the filmmakers expunge so much of what made the Padgett story memorable?

Specifically, I was quite offended that the film made absolutely nothing of the Lewis Carroll connection. (The title shift should have warned me that this was coming.) The idea that "Jabberwocky" is actually a coded equation to breaking through to the next dimension is just such a fabulous concept! Along with that, there's the story's suggestion that the original Alice's childish ramblings were actually her attempt to learn and use what earlier time-traveling "toys" had to teach. But, alas, she was just too old to make a complete connection to a new way of thinking, seeing, and being. (A poignant commentary on the downside of "human development.")

The fact is that these ideas from the story could easily have been worked into the movie. However, the film was just too busy with Tibetan imagery and product placement to bother with such a literary homage. Perhaps they believed that movie viewers of 2007 would have no idea who Lewis Carroll is, but if that was the case, why do they depict Emma's babysitter showing Emma the poem and a picture of Alice with a Mimzy twin? Nothing

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is made of this moment, and the scene quickly dissolves into one of the movie's more comical bits, when Emma shares her ability to atomize her hand — in a manner very reminiscent of the cover of James Frey's pilloried "memoir" — with the appalled sitter, who runs screaming from the house.

Perhaps the Carroll content simply ended on the cutting room floor. Certainly there are several plot elements that simply peter out without adequate resolution in the film. Notably the big bad Homeland Security dudes watch in amazement as our two young heroes create a super generator and mandala wormhole to transmit contraband into another dimension and then apologetically climb into their choppers and fly off. I laughed out loud at the unintentional humor of that one. (As if the whole family wouldn't have been locked up for the rest of their natural lives!)

Having nitpicked my way through another column, you might question my earlier observation about being pleasantly surprised by *The Last Mimzy*. But keep in mind that I was expecting absolute anathema. As a film made by studio execs and their posse, it is an unexpectedly agreeable entertainment for anyone not too emotionally connected to Kuttner and Moore's classic tale. It's a bit too metaphysical for small children, and a tad too twee for some adults, so I'd guess that the empowered children of *The Last Mimzy* would most enchant older kids in the 'tween age group.

I wasn't enchanted, but, on the other hand, I didn't think about my torn rotator cuff, the work I had piled up at home, or the war in Iraq once during the ninety minutes of the screening. And that's saying something.

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Nancy Farmer's name might not be familiar to all of our readers, but those of you who keep up with fiction for youngsters will recognize her as the author of The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm, The House of the Scorpion, *and most recently,* The Sea of Trolls. The Land of the Silver Apples, *a sequel to* The Sea of Trolls, *is due out in August. Longtime readers might remember her first appearance, in our pages, "Origami Mountain," back in 1992. Her new story was originally written for a YA anthology, but the editor said it was "too **** gross for children and makes me want to sandpaper off my skin." So consider yourself warned, children — this story might literally make your skin crawl.*

The Mole Cure

By Nancy Farmer

"I'M LATE FOR WORK," SAID Laura.

"Look at this one." Tony pointed to a spot on his cheek.

"Oh, no! I don't have time for this." His wife attempted to get out the door, but Tony stopped her. He turned to get a better view in the mirror. This was difficult in the light of a twenty-five-watt bulb, but Tony was accustomed to dim light. The heavy curtains in the apartment were drawn and the blinds were down. An air purifier in a corner sucked up germs, pollen, and dust mites.

"It's a freckle," Laura said.

"No, it isn't," said Tony, annoyed by her lack of sympathy. "That's a classic irregular, pigmented lesion, number 4A." He pointed at the mole chart hanging next to the mirror.

"Wow. Spectacular. Listen, I'll be late tonight. Could you pick up a pizza?" Laura dodged around him and a huff of air followed her out the

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door. The apartment was equipped with a positive air pressure system, like the ones in top secret government labs, to repel West Nile virus, anthrax, bird flu, and Ebola.

Tony studied mole number 4A. He knew it was plotting to kill him. It was one of the bad ones that would turn into cancer the minute it got a shot of cigarette smoke. Actually, they were all bad ones, like gang members waiting on the street corner for the nerd to come out.

Tony couldn't open a magazine without reading about something lethal — radon in the basement, mad cow disease, cosmic rays tearing through bone marrow. When he was little he'd chewed on a crib covered in white lead paint. (Thanks, Mom.) He'd gone to a school with asbestos in the walls. But nothing worried him as much as the moles.

Red, mouse-brown, charcoal, and black, they covered Tony's body. Everyone said they were freckles, but he knew better. They only looked like freckles when doctors examined them. The rest of the time they lounged insultingly on his skin, waiting for him to make a mistake. *Give us sunlight, baby,* they crooned, *some of that sweet, sweet ultraviolet.*

Tony dressed slowly, sipping a bottle of triple-distilled water. He wore a long-sleeved shirt with air vents in the arm pits that looked like little screen doors. He put on a wide-brimmed hat, dark glasses, and an air filter over his nose that made him look — Laura said — like a human fly. He covered his hands with the kind of sunblock astronauts wore in outer space.

It was a beautiful spring day outside. A haze of fungus spores floated past the air filter, hoping to gain access to his lungs and grow like kudzu vines. Tony sat on the shady side of the train. The seats farthest from him filled up first and then, like antelopes being herded toward a pond they know contains a crocodile, the latecomers edged into the seats next to Tony. He read an article in a health magazine about a boy who was paralyzed from the neck down by a tick bite.

There was a law against smoking in offices, but Tony's boss paid no attention to it. None of the worker bees was going to turn him in. "Fine day," he said, blowing smoke over the mole on Tony's cheek. Tony felt the mole tingle in response. "Dark in here, isn't it?" His boss lifted the blind and sunlight poured in, bathing Tony's back with *sweet, sweet ultraviolet.*

Tony sat quite still. He heard a tiny cheer. The moles had the ball and

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were headed for a touchdown. The fans went wild. The star player, a muscular melanoma, was cutting down the opposition like a scythe.

Tony let the blind down with a crash.

"You know," said his boss, "I've been worried about you. You sit in here all day muffled up like the Invisible Man. You never come out for a coffee break."

"Coffee gives you heart trouble," said Tony.

"Look, I've been talking to Laura. We both think you need a vacation."

"Are you firing me?" Tony asked.

"No, no. I'm doing you a favor. Go out and play. Take Laura to the beach. Soak up a little UV."

Tony looked at him as though he were crazy.

"That's an order," said his boss. "One month minimum. Oh, and when you come back, lose the air filter."

Tony knew they were talking about him in the office as he gathered up his stuff. He decided to walk home, not caring where he went so long as there was enough shade. Trucks exhaled diesel around him. A man with a leaf blower chased a cloud of pollutants down a walk. But after a while he found himself in a quiet, tree-covered neighborhood.

The shade was deep and satisfying, and the walls covered with ivy echoed the cool green of the branches overhead. A bronze oval, almost hidden in leaves, said *Dr. Molnar's Mole Cure.*

Mole cure.

Tony had never heard of such a thing. He tiptoed to a window draped with dark velvet curtains and peered through a gap. He saw heavy, antique furniture. There were walls lined with bookshelves and a ladder to reach the upper levels. A small table held a flowered teapot and cups. It was like something from an old movie, and Tony liked it in spite of the dust mites and allergens that probably lived there.

He rang the bell and the door flew open as though the man on the other side had been waiting for him. "Naughty boy! I saw you peeking," cried Dr. Molnar. He was small, with glistening black eyes and black hair that lay flat against his scalp as though painted on.

"I — uh, I read your sign," said Tony. "It's kind of small, if you want to attract business." He worked for an advertising firm.

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"It is...*exactly*...the right size." Dr. Molnar paused for emphasis. "Too large and you attract the wrong sort. My sign is only visible to the truly needy."

"Truly needy?" echoed Tony, wondering who *the wrong sort* was.

"I have seen people in the throes of divorce, who have lost jobs, who are contemplating suicide. They come to me, imploring me on bended knee to remove the parasites that have sucked the joy out of their existence. *Those* parasites." The little man waved his hand at a chart that Tony recognized as the same one that decorated his wall. Only this chart was much larger. Mole number 4A lounged in the middle like the centerfold for *Mole Monthly*. "The procedure is painless, of course," continued the doctor. "This way, please. I need to examine you."

Tony was accustomed to doctors trying to evict him from their offices and so he was flattered, if alarmed, to see Dr. Molnar's enthusiasm for his skin. "Such vigor! Such variety!" the little man cried, dancing around. "I have rarely seen such a marvelous collection. We must begin at once."

"Wait a minute!" Tony backed away. "I need to think about this."

"Let me show you something," said Doctor Molnar, propelling him back to the elegant study and whisking a heavy silk cover from an object in a corner.

It was a mirror. The oval frame was wreathed in serpents that twined about one another with the occasional flash of a jeweled eye. The glass itself was backed with gold, not silver like an ordinary mirror, and Tony's reflection was darker. He caught his breath. By some trick of light the moles had vanished! His skin was perfect, as he had only imagined it in dreams.

"You see?" the little man said. "I got that mirror from a Transylvanian gypsy. He said it was used to detect vampires, but I discovered that it also doesn't reflect moles."

"So moles don't go to heaven," said Tony, obscurely pleased by the idea.

"That could be you," Dr. Molnar said, resting his soft little hand on Tony's shoulder, "free of the invading army that has dominated you so long. You see, *moles aren't what people think*. They don't merely sit around like bumps on a log. They insinuate themselves into every activity and make you behave in a way that is beneficial to them, not you. First and

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foremost, they do not allow you to take risks, for that might damage their comfortable existence. Mole hosts live in an atmosphere of fear."

"Mole *hosts*?" murmured Tony, finding himself ensconced in an extremely comfortable armchair. He had no memory of sitting down.

"You fear pizza because the salt might raise your blood pressure. Coffee might give you heart palpitations. Don't go into the basement — it's full of radon. Don't go outside. Jet planes could drop blue ice on your head. All these fears exist to make you passive and safe."

"Cat dander, rogue golf balls, runaway shopping carts," Tony said, mentioning three of his favorite phobias.

"The ideal host for a colony of moles is a couch potato watching TV shows about global warming. But we're going to fix that."

Dr. Molnar poured Tony a cup of tea. It was excellent, flavored with an unfamiliar spice. A sense of well-being swept through Tony's body, and his skin tingled pleasantly. A tape recorder clicked on nearby. *How nice. Music*, he thought. Tony drifted asleep as Billie Holliday sang the blues.

HE WOKE UP in the armchair. Darkness had fallen and he heard something large being moved on squeaky wheels in the next room. The doctor popped through the door like a squirrel that has just deposited a large cache of nuts. "Perfect! You're awake on schedule. I find a slice of Sacher torte restores one's spirits enormously."

Dr. Molnar cut a slab of dark, moist cake glistening with chocolate. Tony ate ravenously, licking the chocolate from his fingers, something he never, *ever* did. Think of the carbohydrates! The trans-fats! He hadn't even disinfected his hands!

Tony studied his arm in the mellow light of the library. "They're gone," he said wonderingly. "Not many, but some." Here and there, among the brown, red and charcoal moles, were tiny pucker marks.

"I only take one type at a time," the doctor explained. "Today I removed the slate blues."

"There's a difference?" Tony asked.

"Good heavens, yes. Moles are as various as dogs. You wouldn't expect a chihuahua to behave like a chow."

Something about the way Dr. Molnar spoke raised distant alarm bells

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in Tony's mind. He imagined the little man calling moles like a pack of hounds: *Here, Blue! Come here, Blue! Good boy!* But the fee the doctor charged was laughably small, and Tony felt too contented to argue. The doctor paid for the taxi to take him home.

That night, Tony and Laura celebrated with a candlelight dinner. Because he had already abused his body with a carb overload, Tony agreed to have a sip of Laura's champagne. He found it delicious and didn't even get heartburn later.

"What drug are you giving me?" Tony was back in the armchair, cradling the cup of tea. It was his fifth treatment and the slate blues had been followed by the smoky topazes, the hairy browns, and port wines. The earliest pucker marks were filling in. Not only that, but several phobias had vanished. One of them, the belief that a black widow spider had spun a web under the toilet seat, had been with him since childhood.

Until now, Tony had not felt bold enough to ask questions and Doctor Molnar had not volunteered any answers. But today was different.

Tony had gone back to work. His new confidence had allowed him to leave the air filter at home. He even went to coffee break, although he brought his own bottle of triple-distilled water. No matter. His boss and fellow workers had welcomed him just the same.

"Actually, I use two drugs," said Dr. Molnar. "One is a tranquilizer and the other is my personal discovery. My Ph.D. thesis was on slime molds. The slime mold is a single-celled creature dwelling in water throughout most of its existence. It lives like a hermit until it has used up the food in its neighborhood. Then," the little man's eyes glistened and for the first time Tony noticed how *velvety* they seemed, "it wants company. Naturally, being a mere speck, it cannot shout. Instead, it sends out a chemical message, a pheromone that says, *yoo hoo, I am lonely.*"

The way Dr. Molnar said *yoooo hoooo* was like a tiny wolf howl.

"The specks come together in their thousands," he went on. "They make a multi-celled being called a slug. It has a head, a tail, a driving purpose. Out of the Many comes the One. It is one of the great miracles of nature." Dr. Molnar was so moved, he wiped his velvety eyes. Tony had a sudden urge to get up and flee, but he had already drunk half the tea. The familiar sleepiness was beginning to overwhelm him.

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"A slug is able to move great distances, but once it finds a new territory and food source, another miracle occurs," the doctor explained. "The One becomes the Many again. The single cells wander off...to feed." Dr. Molnar sat back, as pleased as a puppy that has just retrieved a tennis ball.

Tony struggled to stay awake. "Thish pheromone works on moles?" he slurred.

"With a little help. It needs a trigger."

"Wha—what trigger?" Tony said with a tongue that seemed to weigh a thousand pounds.

"Music." The doctor clicked on the tape recorder and Frank Sinatra's voice filled the room. Tony's skin tingled in response. Some of it tingled. He closed his eyes and let the drug carry him away.

The smooth purples were partial to Frank Sinatra, and when Tony awoke, all five of them had departed. That left only the bruise greens and speckled blacks. "I can't warm up to speckled blacks," said Dr. Molnar, frowning. "I suppose it's because I don't like Country & Western music. Speckled blacks won't respond to anything else and they always seem, I don't know, like they'd chew tobacco and spit. They're essentially low-rent."

Tony's mouth was crammed with Sacher torte. He couldn't seem to help himself after a treatment. He wanted more and more sugar and fat, as though he were making up for years of privation. Then his brain fogged up from the sugar high and all too soon he was on his way home in a taxi.

When he sobered up the next morning, Tony decided he wouldn't go for another treatment.

His resolve only lasted five days. He was *so close.* There were only eight speckled blacks and a baker's dozen of bruise greens. With them gone he would be perfect. One thing he was certain of: No more tranquilizers.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said the doctor when Tony posed his conditions.

"I'd like to see what happens."

"The sight would be extremely disturbing."

"Exactly what happens when I'm unconscious?" insisted Tony.

Instead of answering, the little man whisked the heavy, silk cover

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from the golden mirror. The serpents flashed their jeweled eyes and when Tony wasn't looking directly at them, he heard a rustling and a dry flickering. He gazed at his darker self floating in a golden world, tranquil and perfect. And then he saw something he hadn't noticed the first time. Dr. Molnar was standing beside him *but he had no reflection in the mirror.*

"We are not all evil," said Dr. Molnar, "those of us who do not appear in the glass. We are not all vampires."

Tony's head was swimming. He felt the doctor's soft, damp presence beside him. "What are you?" he whispered.

"Call me a shepherd," said Dr. Molnar with an odd sort of dignity. "A shepherd of a rather unusual flock, but one that has been immensely kind to you. Remember how desperate you were when you first came here."

"I remember," Tony said unwillingly, staring at his golden reflection.

"I will treat you one more time," the doctor decided, "on your terms. But I must take precautions. Which moles would you like me to remove?"

Tony chose the bruise greens because there were more of them.

Dr. Molnar ran straps across Tony's chest and legs, his wrists and ankles. Tony choked down a moment of panic. *Of course* there were no such things as vampires. *Of course* the doctor had never been anything but understanding and kind. The pheromone in the tea rested heavily on his tongue, but without tranquilizers his mind stayed clear.

He heard a squeaking noise as something heavy was wheeled to the side of the armchair. He glimpsed an aquarium. Something clouded the bottom that might have been algae except that it flashed from side to side with breathtaking speed.

"Past your feeding time," remarked Dr. Molnar. He opened a styrofoam container and tipped the contents inside. The darkness flashed over. The hamburger steamed and bubbled. An oily stain spread over the water, accompanied by an acrid smell.

Now Tony wanted to ask for the tranquilizer, but the thought of lying unconscious next to whatever-that-was stopped him cold. Dr. Molnar flicked on the tape recorder.

The bruise-greens, it turned out, were fond of Wagner. As the *Ride of the Valkyries* filled the room, Tony felt stirrings under his skin. In ten or perhaps twelve places he felt a twitching like an ant struggling up through

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sand. He sensed answering thrums from other places, of creatures half-awakened but too comatose to rise.

And he felt pleasure, a startling and fierce joy to be coming together. It was a longing so intense he wanted to cry. And now the ant struggled to the top of the sand. Tony looked down. A blob the size of a raisin was heaving on his chest. As the Valkyries rode the heavens, it wrenched itself loose and began streaming across Tony's chest, trailing a long slime of obscene tendrils behind it. It was joined by another blob from the solar plexus. For an instant they reared at each other, writhing to the music, and then they flowed together. There was a single blob now, twice as large, and this was joined by a third and a fourth. From under his shoulder Tony felt a fifth struggle.

A strange emotion swept over him: Desolation, such horrible desolation as Tony had never imagined possible — howling outer darkness and loneliness and despair. It was so unnecessary, this pain. Beyond the loneliness was a togetherness where all was warmth and mingling. Tony struggled against the straps. Tears streamed down his face.

"Courage. It will soon be over." The doctor sat by his side and watched the hosting of the moles.

Now ten, now twelve moles melted into one. The thirteenth, which had traveled all the way from Tony's ankle, arrived and melted gladly into the mass. A respectable-sized slug reared itself on his chest. It drew itself into a finger and swayed back and forth.

Dr. Molnar reached down with a long pair of forceps and lifted the slug from its base. At once, it swarmed up the metal. "Naughty, naughty," he admonished. He laid the forceps across the aquarium.

The surface of the water heaved into a glistening hump and drew the small slug into its embrace. Then it sank back and flattened into a shadow. But in that instant Tony had seen that it was *huge*. It was hard to say how huge because the creature flickered restlessly from one end of the aquarium to the other. And as it moved, it thrummed the sides of the glass in a hypnotic tattoo. It made a deep sound like the thump of engines in the bowels of a ship. Tony felt himself drawn to the rhythm in a curious way. He looked down and saw his arms had turned white from his efforts to get free.

Dr. Molnar turned off the tape recorder. In the sudden silence the

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thrumming boomed at its true level. It seemed to move through the earth and vibrate in Tony's chest and shake apart the glue that held his cells together. It was atrocious and yet...somehow...

Fun.

The thrumming died away. There was only the restless flickering of the shadow as it prowled the tank. Dr. Molnar removed a pair of earplugs and laid them on a table.

A door opened. Tony saw several shapes moving around in the next room. One of the shapes approached him: A small, hunched man in a lab coat. It was difficult to tell what nationality the person was because his features were oddly blurred and his skin was a strange color. If Tony had to put a name to it, he would have called it *smoky topaz.*

The man spoke to Dr. Molnar, except that it wasn't exactly speech. It was more like the ragged chirp of crickets in a meadow on a summer night. Dr. Molnar nodded and the man wheeled the tank from the study. The door closed.

"Not a nice experience, eh?" the doctor said, undoing the straps and buckles that held Tony to the armchair.

"Not nice," Tony agreed. He stood up and vomited on the carpet.

TONY ONLY RETURNED to Dr. Molnar's office once, or rather he returned to the area. It looked different with the fall leaves turning red and gold. He walked up and down, searching for a small, bronze plaque in the ivy, but he couldn't find it.

Perhaps it was because he wasn't needy enough, or perhaps he had become one of *the wrong sort.* He was still in possession of eight speckled blacks. That didn't seem to qualify him for treatment.

Tony knocked on a few doors. People looked at him curiously and turned away when he asked for a mole doctor. And yet he was certain that somewhere, either on this block or the next, hidden behind a wall, the shepherd was still gathering his flock: *Here, Blue! Come here, Blue! Good boy!*

When enough of the Many came together, they became the One. He might have passed such a being on the train, holding onto a strap with a damp hand. Or shuffling along a sidewalk after dark, hunting for new

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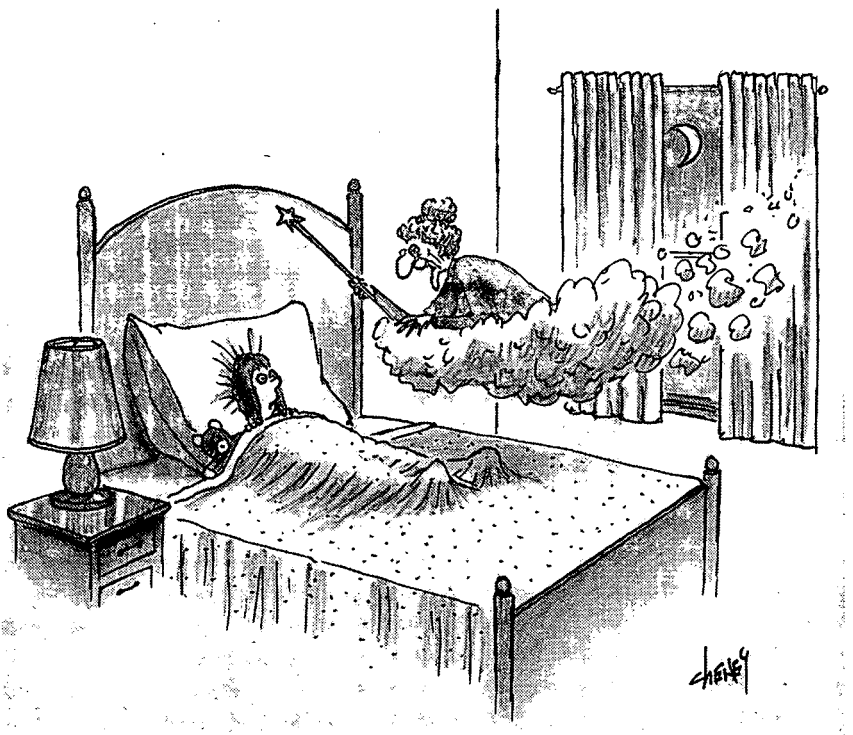
territory with abundant food. When it found such a haven — a maternity ward? A playground? — did the One become the Many again?

Tony no longer drove everyone crazy with disinfectants and sunscreen. He took Laura to Hawaii and their lovemaking was spectacular. He was promoted at work. He was voted most popular employee by his peers. He was happier than he could ever remember being.

And if he had to leave the theater halfway through *Walk the Line*, no one commented on it. Or if he started scratching wildly during *American Idol* or locked himself in the bathroom and screamed when someone put on a Patsy Cline record — why, everyone is entitled to a few odd moments. By all reports, the rest of his behavior was without blemish.



"The Tooth Fairy's job is done here — I'm the Wrinkle Bitch."

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Last time we saw Persimmon Gaunt and Imago Bone, it was in "Penultima Thule" (Aug. 2006) as we read of their efforts to dispose of the cursed book, Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow.

After that story — in which the wizard Krumwheezle plays a small but important role — Mr. Willrich started thinking more about the old mage. And he found the wizard's story was worth telling. We think you'll enjoy reading it. (By the way, as an experiment, we're reprinting one of the Gaunt and Bone stories on our Website this month. If you like it, tell your friends.)

A Wizard of the Old School

By Chris Willrich

IN A TIME WHEN FABLE passed its torch to History, when the old gods slept under hillsides or gravestones, and banking more than blades sealed countries' fates, two well-mannered rogues called upon a wizard of the Old School.

This wizard had known ne'er-do-wells of many kinds: Spiral Sea corsairs, lastborn Swanisle nobles, pugilists from Amberhorn's alleys. He nodded at their wants — eversharp cutlasses, say, or toxic caviar, or fingerbones of adamantine — and gave them what they needed: a book on meditation, or a trade map to the Spicelands, or a letter of introduction to a Blacksmiths' Guild.

For his forbearance folk ceased calling him *Krumwheezle of the Old School,* and named him *the petty-mage of Scuttlesand,* after the dilapidated fishing village he'd guarded these sixty years. They said his power had dried like his wrinkled hide, frozen like his joints, and few rogues, adventurers, or kings called at his door. Mostly he served his villagers with a cup of tea and a respectful ear, or sometimes a small

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adjustment in the weather, or a cunningly contrived wooden toy.

Krumwheezle was not without pride, however. Sometimes he straightened himself before his magic mirror (without waking the poor cracked thing) and wondered where the lean wisp of an apprentice had gone, that rangy pale customer crowned with wild dark hair, graced with quick frosty eyes. Who *was* this pudgy master with the scraggly salt beard, the leathery face, the permanent stoop? He'd never been handsome, really, but always he'd envisioned his grayer self framed by a court wizard's finery, marked by a gaze weighty with the dooms of empires. Instead he bore a fisherman's sweater and laugh-lines from generations of children's birthday parties. At times he missed the old visitors from the mighty cities and storied lands. And to anyone who still listened, he styled himself Krumwheezle of the Old School.

That was how he introduced himself to the wayfarers with the intriguingly sinister names Gaunt and Bone.

They made a striking couple — for couple they surely were, though they made no mention of it, nor showed affection at first.

Persimmon Gaunt was not quite so grim as her surname implied; her frame was sturdy and a faint smile warmed a pale face beneath auburn hair. Imago Bone was better dubbed, a tall, wiry sort with hard eyes and fidgety, slender hands. They did not seem so disreputable as their introduction claimed — *We are thieves, honored wizard, but mean no harm to you or your furnishings* — though Krumwheezle noted that Gaunt was tattooed with a rose-and-spiderweb motif, and that Bone bore a pair of facial scars, one from blade, one from flame.

They walked politely enough behind Krumwheezle to the solarium, and were discreet in sizing up the Empress Nayne-era suits of armor, the Palmarian astrolabe-chandelier, and the Mirabad red carpet with the one less-than-obvious flaw. The wizard could warm to thieves who used the door knocker and wiped their feet before entering. But there was something about the pair that aroused his unease. He hoped he could place it.

They reached the solarium, and the gasps behind him were satisfying.

Krumwheezle affected no outward displays of power save one. His tower was an ordinary, moss-covered, three-story affair jutting from a lip

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of rock overhanging the foam of the Spiral Sea, and it boasted no golem doormen, no demonlocks, no omnidirectional lightning rods.

Its only magical conceit was that it extended downward from the bluff rather than upward, so that on stormy days the wavetops kissed its upper turrets, and saltwater speckled the glass dome of the solarium. Gaunt and Bone had entered through a tunnel in the coastal rock, one cunningly designed to loop about and ease visitors through the gravity reversal. The wizard smiled at the impact of the view. He'd built the sanctum in imitation of the Topless Tower of the Archmage, which hung in the great cavern of Ebontide. It had been too long since he'd had new visitors.

Krumwheezle served his guests Mirabad tea as the waves boomed and hissed overhead. While the three made halting chitchat, inverted seagulls bobbed against the blue like little clouds drifting before a stormbank.

"It is something of a disposal problem," Persimmon Gaunt said at last. She focused on the waves overhead, as if uncomfortable with soft chairs and porcelain cups, but ever ready to appreciate wonders.

"Ah, hm," Krumwheezle said, warming to Gaunt, but fearing what was coming. "Perhaps I am, well, guilty of false advertising. Though I style myself a wizard of the Old School, I am estranged from my colleagues and their noxious ways. To be blunt, I do not assassinate."

"We know," Imago Bone said. "It is not a person. It would be easier if it were." By contrast with Gaunt, he lounged easily in his chair, having without visible result added five cups of tea and eight sweetcakes to his lanky frame. But he avoided looking up, as if magic disagreed with him. "It is an item of enchantment."

Gaunt reached into the pack beside her, producing a tome. It was old, drab, and undecorated, yet when she placed it among the teacups, Krumwheezle's neck tingled as if she'd unhooded a cobra.

Bone said, "We acquired it in a caper rife with supernatural acrimony. We wish to be rid of it."

"In so many words," Gaunt said, tapping a fingernail on the cover, "the book imposes fatal ill-fortune on anyone who reads it. So please don't. Simply tell us how we might destroy it, and name your fee."

Krumwheezle pulled out a rune-covered silver monocle upon a white gold chain.

He'd torn the crystal from the ocular socket of a cockatrice that had

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lost a staring contest with a Gorgon. He'd drenched it in the eye of a roc. Last, he'd ground it with stones from the darksome plains of the Man in the Moon's stare.

A wizard peering through such a monocle could of course be just as deluded as one using ordinary vision. But there was far more information to be deluded by.

Krumwheezle could not help noticing, for example, that the man Bone had an ashen aura implying extreme age, despite his twentyish appearance. Flecks of bright passion stirred within the ash, like embers in a rekindled fire.

But Gaunt's aura was something else again. It crackled with youth, as Krumwheezle would expect. But it too had its ashen quality, as if Gaunt's spirit pined for the grave. Oddly, in her there seemed nothing unhealthy about this morbid streak, which merely enriched the generous glow of her being. Indeed, seen within her aura, Gaunt struck him with her profound beauty.

Where her aura neared the book, however, it dimmed. The book itself was shadowed, as though despite the ripples of sunlight that threaded the chamber, it were nighttime on that corner of Krumwheezle's table. "Nasty aura you've got there," he remarked, running his hand over the thing.

"Pray don't open it," Gaunt said quickly, before lifting her own hand.

Their fingers' proximity and Gaunt's concern gave Krumwheezle a guilty, giddy tingle. But he focused on the sensations rising from the book. It was as though hordes of invisibly tiny insects were gnawing new hives into his fingertips. He recalled a similar feeling once when he'd touched a flask full of noisome vitriol concocted by Sarcopia Vorre herself, long before she became Archmage. The memory had other associations, almost as dark. He frowned, looked the rogues over again. Yes, now that he was watching for it, he saw traces of the book's aura spattered across Gaunt's and Bone's, like inkdrops in a kettle of tea. He put the monocle away. "A viral enchantment," he muttered.

Then he leaned back in his wicker chair beneath the stuffed remains of his familiars, Graymilk, Croaksong, Squeakfellow, and Coalwing. He missed them; it had been long since any new ones had inquired at his door.

"It is a *cacography*, this book," Krumwheezle said at last, unease and memory making him speak abruptly. "Forgive me — a term of Art."

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Gaunt was staring up through the solarium glass, as though avoiding sight of the book. "Cacography. I assume you don't simply mean 'badly written?'"

"That is the mundane meaning. But mundane 'bad writing' merely annoys. Magical cacographies corrupt and kill. They are full of tantalizing lore. Yet their ink is rife with contagion." He thought of the books he'd studied under close supervision at the Old School, the *Visible Sorcerer*, made from an illusionist's flesh...or the *Codex Marginalis*, deranged notes scrawled by a necromancer across thirteen books of wholesome instruction...or the *Dictionary of Missing Magi*, which somehow contained dread biographies of wizards who vanished while reading that selfsame work. "And," he continued, "I have never seen one that dripped so with malice. Indeed, I suspect the creator exceeded expectations. Most authors of cacographies hope their work will be copied, to plague the world. But no one could survive the ordeal of transcribing this tome. How ever did you come by it?"

"The price of escaping a more immediate problem," Gaunt said, and did not elaborate. "You say it's growing in strength."

"Over time the viral enchantment has evolved. It is learning how to damage its victims without killing them. You two, for instance."

Imago Bone stirred at that. "Us?" he said.

"Your auras are tainted by the thing. You probably have been having your own sorts of ill luck." He questioned them as to strange coincidences, the unexpected arrival of old enemies, the targeting of their inns by exotic horrors. He saw the look of recognition in their eyes. Then, not so gingerly, he asked about pregnancy.

Gaunt was annoyed, which pained Krumwheezle. But Bone answered frankly; Krumwheezle gave him that much. "No," the thief said. "For many years my associates were angels of death. Long before I met Gaunt, it seemed such company had made me infertile."

"Ah, that may be. But I suspect the book's proximity would prevent children in any case. It's begun to draw its noose around you."

"So it's trying to kill *us*?" Gaunt said. "Even though we've not read a word?"

Bone slapped his knee, startling Krumwheezle. The wizard lost track of what the thief was saying, preoccupied with the implications of the

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book. Oddly, his mind wandered back to his last night at the Old School, standing above poor trussed Gibberly with the sacrificial knife in hand...and all at once teetering, not so much with the evil of what he'd intended, but the sheer pathetic waste.

"That's what comes of charity!" the thief was saying.

Krumwheezle was vexed at his own lapse in focus, but annoyed with the thief's babbling as well. "It is worse than that, Imago Bone," Krumwheezle said, wanting to shock him into silence. "This book may kill us all."

That stole their attention. He explained how the contagion of ill luck could spread far and wide, slowly destroying more and more of the world. And how this exposed the fragility in creation's fabric.

"The more lives snuffed by the book, the more meaning dims. Indeed, our world — a flat Earth where the nearer stars are luminescent dragon eggs, the farther ones divine campfires — cannot exist without meaning and beauty." He recalled discarding both dagger and career and stalking out of the Old School...and how in his misery he still apprehended the thousands of brilliant pinpoints piercing the desert night. "Like as not we'll vanish like a punctured soap bubble."

"How long?" Bone asked.

"Centuries, perhaps. Or perhaps years. But that will be the ultimate result of your blasted book."

He knew he was not up to the challenge of ending this threat. Indeed, all he knew who had both power and stamina — his colleagues of the Old School — he couldn't trust. They would instead try to master the book, enslaving the world or hastening its doom. The dark, fierce eyes of Sarcopia blinked in his memory, unbidden.

You will have no legend, no songs, came her remembered voice. *At the core of you lies nothing...so any multiplication of your power will amount to the same. My consort must be a Something.*

Gaunt was saying, "Master Krumwheezle? *Is* there a way to destroy it?"

He was jolted again from memory. This Gaunt, as fierce as Sarcopia, yet so different....

And here was the true bafflement about his visitors. This Gaunt was not really a rogue, but a kind and beautiful soul, seeking good for the world. A soul such as he'd tried to become since leaving the School.

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And yet she orbited a conniving man, one with an undeserved span of days, older than Krumwheezle himself yet possessed of unnatural youth.

They looked at him expectantly. He rubbed his temple; such thoughts were unworthy.

"I fear this problem is beyond me. My training is classical, and the classical methods are out of reach. The subterranean candlewyrms ebb low in this age, and volcanoes burn cooler. The fires of the arkendrake Kindlekarn might suffice, but rumor puts him in the uttermost East, mating with the rain-aspected females of his kind. If two of the Levitating Lands collided, the book *might* be shredded between them; yet in these late days most are shattered, and who can predict the survivors' motions? And if you can distill the Universal Solvent, you are better wizards than I...or any now living." He sighed. He might have added there were wizards they could consult, of greater skill. But he dared not. "You may consult my library if that will help."

Gaunt bowed. "They say a wizard's library is worth its weight in ambrosia."

Krumwheezle smirked. "They do if they haven't tasted any."

Imago Bone was peering up at the waves. "What did you say about our world?"

The man's slowness annoyed Krumwheezle. He sighed. "It is a world suffused in meaning, and thus vulnerable...."

"No. You said the Earth is *flat*. I always knew that. But I did not think.... Gaunt, can we not simply throw the book off the edge?"

She nodded. "Yes! Yes. It seems too obvious. But sometimes obvious solutions are best."

Krumwheezle knew at once she was doomed, and that it was useless to dissuade her. How many other lovely young women had followed the wrong man off a cliff? Gaunt was only doing it more literally than most.

He thought this, but said only, "I will advise and equip you, but I will not accompany you. Forgive me." He feared Gaunt detected too much pain in his voice, and it was suddenly important that she never guess his feelings. He summoned a tone more befitting a wizard. "But there is a price."

"Oh?" Bone said.

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"I would analyze your aura, Imago Bone. You are...strangely prolonged." Krumwheezle raised the monocle. "Hold still."

Bone narrowed his eyes. "And what do you hope to gain from this?"

"What else?" Krumwheezle said. "Extension of my own life."

But though they agreed, they did not perceive that the wizard of the Old School spent more time surreptitiously studying Gaunt than looking directly at Bone.

Whether reality unraveled or Krumwheezle's body gave out, either way his world would end sooner than not. He meant to grasp a memory of beauty until that day.

IN A TIME when Myth passed its torch to Fable, when the sun rose in the south and set in the north, a band of wizards raised the New School. They were not like the wizards of Krumwheezle's time, cloaked, bespectacled, surrounded by tomes. These were men in animal skins as fierce as warriors, who bound the souls of their enemies in fingerbones, who carried their power in song. Their chants split wind and stone, and screeching gales lofted three dozen natural pillars to a silent grotto in the desert. At the heart of their stone circle they raised a Headstone from the Earth's secret depths. They drew lots and with their gnarled staves beat the brains of the loser into the massive rock. They did this for generations, and the Headstone became wise.

After the gods at the world's either end vied for the sun and its course was changed, after mortal heroes supplanted demigods and Fable raised its torch high, the School was still there, though no longer New. Its place in the desert was still hot and quiet, and the sun still passed directly overhead, though by a different road. The Headstone still presided over students, now white-robed men with tall hats and crooked knives. They learned the lore of wind and ghosts and stars, and sacrificed but one human being a month, and believed themselves civilized.

When Krumwheezle came, brash and ambitious, to what was now the Old School, the pillars were worn and the Headstone retained a mere impression of eyes, nose, and grimace, and cloaks and codices were the equipment of the day. The students learned many mysteries, how to capture shadows and domesticate demons, how to snuff the bright fire

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behind a man's eyes. They only sacrificed one person a year in secret conclave, and believed themselves refined.

And in the seventh year of his instruction, the first among the graduating class dropped the appointed knife unstained and fled the jeers of the woman he loved — she who was second among the class, she who raised the blade in Krumwheezle's stead.

Six months passed after Gaunt and Bone's interview. These were months in which Krumwheezle took to energetic seaside walks and expeditions against certain monsters which might threaten Scuttlesand should they wander west a hundred miles. He studied various theoretical matters, including, it should be said, viral enchantments. On three separate occasions he believed he'd ceased obsessing over Persimmon Gaunt.

The day after the third such occasion she and Bone returned.

"We require your help," Gaunt said.

"Come in, come in," Krumwheezle said. He hadn't believed he would see the rogues again. His struggle to forget the woman was forgotten in her aroma of sweat and sea-salt, in her flash of auburn hair.

Krumwheezle brought them to the solarium and tried to mask his impatience as he finished repairing a magical toy. Eight-year-old Molly Mucklecomb stood with sober intensity beside a table bearing a three-legged wooden horse. Krumwheezle had already reknit the basic enchantment. All that was left was replacing the fourth leg and incanting the sealing spell. He did so carefully, to all appearances an avuncular figure. No one could suspect he imagined tossing Molly and horse into the sea. The girl was a champion swimmer, after all.

"*Be a good horse,*" he whispered in the tongue of lost Nobeca, and the figurine reared and gave a reedy whinny.

"Thank you for fixing my toy," said the girl in wonder.

"That's fine, Molly. You and Thunderwidget know the way out."

"You look well, Master Krumwheezle," Gaunt said. She appeared kinder and shapelier than before.

"I go walking more." Krumwheezle fetched tea and cakes.

Above the solarium, the salmon prepared for their journey upriver to spawn. Silver arcs descended and rose with a splash.

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"I hope scanning my aura," Bone said, "was helpful to you." He seemed to Krumwheezle leaner and more cloying.

"Mm," Krumwheezle said. "So. Were you successful?"

They nodded in silence, in their reticence more like monks than thieves.

"You have done," he admitted, "what I thought impossible. It may be I owe you what years remain to me. How might an old man help you?"

"Of those magic-workers who haven't sent us against improbable odds, smothered us with enchanted scrolls, or tried to harvest our skeletons," Bone said, "you are the best. So we would have your advice on something." Where Bone's voice had been blunt, it now became skulking and circumspect. "We, ah, have considered a new direction in our lives, and...."

Gaunt squeezed Bone's shoulder. "Master Krumwheezle," she said, "you recall our last interview?"

"It was memorable."

"The book does make an impression," Gaunt said. "Or made, rather. Leaving aside the particulars, the thing's passing was dramatic."

"Magical effects were spendthrift at that moment," Bone said. "We saw many strange things — including visions."

There was a pause. Then their voices came in a rush, one overwashing the other, as if these rugged wanderers were both adolescents.

"I saw a boy with my face and Bone's eyes," Gaunt said, "in the role of cruel monarch."

"I saw a girl with Gaunt's eyes and my face," Bone said, "riding beside the ocean like a happy maniac."

"We do not understand the visions' meaning, and fear to know," Gaunt concluded. "But we must know."

Krumwheezle let out a short, directed breath. He clasped together his hands.

"Since we last spoke, have you, ah, conceived?"

They shook their heads.

Krumwheezle offered more tea. He was proud of his outward composure, even as a petty part of him enjoyed the likelihood of Bone's infertility.

Stupid, stupid old man, he thought.

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"So," Krumwheezle said, "though the book is gone, it is possible Bone remains tainted. But then how to explain the visions of children? Perhaps you both merely saw what you hoped."

"Yet why," Gaunt said, "would I hope for a child imperious and cruel?"

That did trouble Krumwheezle. The rogues' visions had a mix of the bright and the dark, as life did. Mere hopes and fears did not as a rule have such texture. His daydreams about Gaunt, for example, held no shadows at all.

"I must think about this," he said.

Krumwheezle's body curled like a question mark as the moon descended from the ocean and cast a silvery glaze over the rumpled sheets of his cot. He watched it drop into the night sky, obscuring the constellations and their portents. The stars hadn't helped him anyway. Nor had tea leaves, nor consultation of the *Book of Jagged Lines*, nor the divinatory guts of his salmon dinner. Dreams had not come, but he expected no better from them.

A calm observer may divine a person's best choice of action, they had taught him at the Old School. *But a divided heart cannot divine for itself.* He was simply too close to the problem to see clearly. For he was smitten.

Krumwheezle rose, and knowing it was a foolish act, lit his pipe.

It was not the smoke he feared, for all that younger wizards claimed it was bad for your health. Wizards were a hardy bunch, and besides, Krumwheezle had learned a few things from Bone's aura. No, it was the pipe itself, cut from a dragon's brainpan and the wood of the World Ash, that was perilous.

When the tobacco from Turtle Island filled Krumwheezle's nostrils — making all physical objects seem mere shells concealing a deeper reality — he puffed and waved the pipe. The smoke took the shape of a wide circle touching floor and ceiling. The view through the circle ceased presenting the bureau and armoire and revealed an onyx, inverted tower in a blue-lit cavern beneath the earth.

Then the view clouded and reclarified, and Krumwheezle beheld another bedchamber, this one with a vast canopied bed of teak, its vertices carved into snarling beasts. There were three slaves standing at attention,

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human, delven, and goblin, below an iron chandelier studded with candles in humanoid shape. Each candle was lit, each shuddering a bit. Through the portal of smoke, Krumwheezle heard thin moaning.

He swallowed hard and said, "Archmage. I claim the right of audience."

A tall, raven-haired, snow-skinned woman approached in a silken robe loosely donned. She remained young and shapely, for she practiced arts Krumwheezle would not. Her walk conveyed two messages: that the robe could easily slide off, and that it never would do so, so long as he watched.

"You," came that bright voice, "you claim your rights? You who never graduated?"

"We've been over this. Your predecessor agreed my perquisites — "

"Prattle, prattle, prattle."

"The ceremony was a formality," Krumwheezle snapped.

"Then why did you flee?"

"I had a sudden urge to travel."

She narrowed her eyes. "You spurned me, Krumwheezle. No woman tolerates that."

"Most women want jewelry and kisses, Sarcopia. Not blood."

"The blood of a rival, spilled in honor of the School. Oh, after all this time, Krumwheezle, cease the sanctimony! Surely you understood the whispers of the faculty, those six graduations prior. Why it was so important not to graduate last."

"Believe it or not," Krumwheezle said, "no. I was a conniving, ambitious snot, and capable of murder. But of sacrificing a trussed-up classmate, even Gibberly? No. I was naive enough to interpret certain references metaphorically, until it was too late."

"A wizard must be careful of metaphor. For we make our own realities. We forget that sometimes a dagger is just a dagger, not a symbol of the cunning mind." She smiled. "Or of lower organs."

He smiled back. "Given the nature of our towers, Dark Lady of Ebontide, technically those organs are higher."

She laughed. "It doesn't really matter if you've the right of audience. It's diverting to fence with you in your decrepitude. What do you want, old man?"

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He bit his lip, said, "I've been drafted as something of a family counselor." He outlined the problem, leaving out his compromised feelings.

"Rumors reach me of these rogues," Sarcopia said. "They are linked with disturbances all along the Isles and Spiral Sea, as well as the eastern deserts and the frozen north. You have dangerous clients, Krumwheezle."

"I get little news in Scuttlesand. But I am not surprised. They have formidable auras."

The Archmage cocked an eyebrow. "You lust for the woman."

Krumwheezle flushed. "A fancy of my 'decrepitude.' No harm to anyone."

"This is free advice, one Schoolmate to another. Be rid of Gaunt and Bone."

"Any other advice?"

Sarcopia sighed. "To break their malady, you will need the power of a god."

"The gods are dead. Or sleeping."

"Then they'll be less angry when you steal their power. Wait." Sarcopia crinkled her lip and the human slave departed, returning with a familiar dagger, its gray-green blade the wavy shape of a snake.

"What are you doing with that?" Krumwheezle said.

"My Scruplegore? My valedictorian prize? I thought I might loan it to an old friend."

Without warning she tossed the blade toward his viewpoint, muttering a phrase of drowned Nobeca. The smoke shimmered, and the knife emerged from the scene within, nearly slicing Krumwheezle before piercing his bedsheets.

"Your lost honor," Sarcopia said. "It can be yours again, and it amuses me to help you. You want this Persimmon Gaunt? Then take her. You are a wizard. It is your due. More, the Scruplegore responds to the appetites of the wielder. Honor your hungers, and it will make you strong, vital — young."

The dagger lurked in Krumwheezle's awareness like a viper, but he forced his eyes to stay on Sarcopia. "There is no honor in that."

"Oh? Do this thing, and I'll see to it you're an *honorary* graduate of the Old School."

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"Gaunt loves this thief."

"Then discredit him, tempt him, or kill him. That should be child's play to a skilled wizard. And you are skilled, Krumwheezle. You might have been Archmage. I am not too proud to say that."

"But you are proud. Why are you doing this?"

"You pretend to such ethics, Krumwheezle. You spurned me for your ideals. If I'd lost you to another woman, I would have seen her turned to a pig and fed to your wedding party. But since I lost you to your conscience, it is that I would see destroyed. This audience is ended."

The vision faded and dispersed. Krumwheezle turned, meaning to throw the dagger into the sea. But he hesitated, remembering sitting cross-legged in the desert hearing the Masters' droning lectures...and feeling the cool night air above him and Sarcopia below, upon the still-warm sands. Though the air tasted of sea-spray, his mouth was dry with smoke and desire. He stared at the empty bed, the blade upon it.

"I can throw you away tomorrow," he said.

"I believe your bodies are working fine," he told them next afternoon beside the fireplace, whose flue lanced out the towertop then bent skyward in a U shape, beyond the gravity reversal. Out one window they could watch the smoke coiling down and skyward.

"Bone's fertility," Krumwheezle said, "does seem slightly impaired by his strange longevity. But that is not your true difficulty."

He took another long, sharp sip of tea (he'd removed the leaves for fear of seeing the future) and needlessly poked the embers. "I told you months ago of the viral enchantment."

"We are *still* cursed?" Bone said, pacing and glowering. "Though the book was destroyed?"

"It is a subtle malady," Krumwheezle shot back, "acquired only because you carried the thing so long. This residual ill-luck can trouble you only on the level of the very small. One day, for example, it may spawn harmful cells."

"I don't see what prisons have to do with it," the thief snapped.

Krumwheezle tried to keep the condescension from his voice. He failed. "A term of Art, Imago Bone. Your stuff and sinew are composed of invisibly tiny living components we call cells. If they grow in the wrong

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manner they can harm your body. But your more immediate problem is that the ill-luck is weakening your reproductive cells. Your seed, in other words, is failing to reach Gaunt's eggs."

Gaunt nodded, and asked, "What of my vision? The cruel and powerful child?"

"I am not certain," Krumwheezle told her gently. "There's much we don't know about the development of traits. Much may be decided at the level of the very small. Here again, ill fortune may have its day. Even should you and Bone conceive, your offspring may prove unlucky for the world. I am sorry."

Bone stared into the crackling fire.

"Strange," he said. "When we sought to destroy the book, I didn't so much mind risking life and limb. Yet this little hurt depresses me."

Without another word, he slipped through the window looking out at the chimney smoke, and began climbing toward the sea.

"What!" Krumwheezle sputtered. "What? Does he mean suicide?"

"No," Gaunt said, rising and patting the wizard's hand. "He is an acrophiliac. This is his way of unknotting a troubled brow. It took him great restraint not to scale your sanctum last time. I, for my part, would inscribe stormy thoughts upon a wax tablet. Only to melt them by the fire, so that only tablet and I would know."

Krumwheezle looked up from his hand, transfixed.

Gaunt said, "You've given us a diagnosis. Have you a treatment?"

Words rose to just behind his lips. *There's nothing to be done. Unless you conceive with a man other than Bone, your child may be a monster, if you have one at all.*

"I did think of a possibility," he answered at last. "But it is perilous."

Gaunt smiled dimly. "Go on."

"When gods still walked the West, they shared mortal passions, meddled in mortal lives. Sometimes they contrived tests to prove that one mortal or another was worthy of this boon or that. Some tests concerned love, marriage, childbirth."

"I know such legends."

"Many have a basis in truth. And in scattered lonely places, some tests remain, retaining a modicum of the gods' power. And even a fraction of divine power might undo your small curse."

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Gaunt nodded. "When we tell Bone, he'll want to be about it by sunset. So let's determine which legend we're hunting."

They consulted Krumwheezle's library, which wrapped about a tall spiral staircase. Krumwheezle liked to see his whole collection at a glance, and only the shaft afforded such a view. The tight quarters necessitated grouping first by size, so that atlases shouldered against microscope sketchbooks, demonologies crouched beside hymnals, and agitators' pamphlets concealed arcane codebooks. Gaunt proved surprisingly adept in following Krumwheezle's research, so much that he was glad of his cryptic indexing system. For the warmth of her body as they passed each other on the steps, and the bright eagerness of her mind as their voices echoed through the shaft, made his heart want to flutter up from his chest and peck out the ethical portions of his brain.

And his hand passed by a volume titled *Midsummer Idylls* and settled on one labeled *Dooms of Dark and Frost.*

"Tell me again where we are going," Bone asked, ducking below the self-motivated boom of the sailboat.

"Ages past," Gaunt said, saving Krumwheezle the pain of meeting the thief's quick, darting eyes, "Arthane Stormeye, cold king of gods, favored an icy land of tall pines and hard people. And he laid many boons and dooms upon that folk. One such was a circle of fire about a castle called Nith. Arthane declared whatever man won through the fire to Nith was of the bravest heart, and would found a line generous and true:

Arthane decreed that as desire
Encircles love with hearts' own fire,
That Castle Nith be warded same:
With ring of purifying flame
And only breeched by heart that burns
With lustier light. Such bravery earns:
Golden loot, storied song,
Betrothal bright, and children strong."

She frowned a little. "That at least is the gist I got from the book. The text is fragmentary, and my command of Old Morken is shaky."

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"Yours is sounder than mine," Krumwheezle lied, reclining. He sat with lit pipe by the rudder, and whenever he blew smoke in a new direction, the boat nosed to follow. The sail would flap like the wingbeats of angry birds, then swell full in the wizardly wind. "I trust your translation, and my divinations suggest Castle Nith still exists. Should this fire still burn, braving it will sear away the curse."

"I am sorry," Gaunt said, "we did not find a solution less inflammatory."

Bone waved her off. "This is all commonplace enough — dooms, quests, the promising bit about loot." He regarded the turquoise, white-frilled waves. "I simply want to know why we've sailed *south* to seek a legend of the cold lands."

"This was indeed a long age ago," Krumwheezle said, jabbing his pipe at the dazzling disc overhead. "In those days the sun rose in the south and set in the north. What we now call the torrid zone was only warm far east of here, where the sun crossed the inland desert." He inhaled on the pipe-stem, smoke wreathing his weathered face. "Only in that place are old things unchanged."

They threaded the three vast islands that defined the Spiral Sea, sailing down the Scythe, on past the Hook, out around the Claw. The water grew a richer blue, and shone like a noonday sky where it encircled land. Bird calls became numerous and strange. Rain was intermittent — but when it fell it was a deluge. The travelers dried quickly, and the scent of brine and sweat was faintly intoxicating. The poet and the thief seemed to find it so at any rate, and as the days grew warmer they shed more clothing, so as to better enjoy the dousing and drying — and laughing and touching. They were not so shy around Krumwheezle now.

He, a student of the Algebra of Atmospheres, was obliged to wear a Scuttlesand sweater and heavy pants, for a condition of weather modification was to be inappropriately dressed, and he needed to stoke the wind. He felt pickled in perspiration. He masked his discomfort (and the sight and smell of Persimmon Gaunt) with heavier shrouds of pipe-smoke.

These waters hid pirate havens, and twice they saw ships flying the Four Skulls — one for each of the sentient mortal-kind of the West, a big drake-skull at left and little skulls of human, goblin, and delvenfolk in a triangle to the right. But the travelers made a show of smiling and waving

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while their little ship steered itself; and these corsairs who boasted no fear of arkendrakes declined to follow a wizard.

Two hundred miles past the Claw, they found an uninhabited archipelago. Little mangrove-choked islands marked the watery graves of storm-crowned mountains. And one humid night, with the bright distant stars hanging over an encircling mist like the clouds of World's Rim (though that was far away) they saw, like a little orange lamp in the western fog, the fires of Nith.

"I am prepared," Bone said.

AND INDEED, after they beached on the little key's white sands next afternoon, Bone laid out an intriguing array of cables, pulleys, cloaks, ointments, and one extensible vaulting pole.

"And your heart?" Krumwheezle asked. "This sort of affair tests courage, not physics."

"There is the courage to die," Bone said. "If that kind is required, I will fail. I have slipped death for many a year." He looked at Gaunt. "But there is also the courage to live. To be oneself, and free. If that is the measure of courage, none is braver."

Krumwheezle looked away, and his cheeks burned beneath his beard. Almost he told Bone not to go. But he chanced to see the reflection of Persimmon Gaunt, blurry auburn crown and white shift clarifying down to warm shapely legs descending to the sea's kiss. He felt the curving dagger at his side.

"I am sure you will succeed," he said.

They saw no castle amid the palms and mangroves that jabbed green blades at a cloudless sky. But at dusk, orange flickers danced behind branches at the island's crown, perhaps two hundred feet above the beach. It burned so bright it seemed strange the foliage had not been consumed long ago. They smelled no smoke, just the warm breath of the sea.

In the morning Bone had his bearings and wished them farewell.

Gaunt took his arm, then turned to Krumwheezle. "I've traveled many dark roads beside him. This concerns me as well. You're certain he must go alone?"

The wizard nodded, glad he did not have to lie. "Such tests — sphinx

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riddles, labyrinth threads — they are for individuals, ever since one man stole the secret of fire. And the legend does specify a man. Bone must go alone."

Bone touched her chin. "I spent most of my life alone. A day is not too long, to seal a future with you."

"You needn't do this for me."

"You know that I do."

Krumwheezle looked skyward. When he lowered his head, Bone was ascending into the brush, following a dry streambed, hacking now and then with a machete. Birds of bright white and cool black spilled upward at the crunching of boots, the whacking of the blade. The birds did not appear to be seeking Bone's flesh, Krumwheezle thought with relief. The peril on this island was localized. Bone would meet his fate at its heart.

Gaunt turned to the wizard. Krumwheezle prepared his words of comfort.

"Show me his progress," Gaunt said.

"Eh?"

"You are a wizard. You've spoken of divinatory gifts. You can show me his progress, can you not?" She patted a dagger, as if indifferently.

It seemed to Krumwheezle it would be risky to lie.

"I might," he said.

Through the circle of pipe-smoke they watched Imago Bone.

The thief did not reach the summit until late afternoon. Honed by second-story windows and trap-laden tombs, Bone's body clearly rebelled at tropical bushwhacking. Once he tumbled into a natural well, and came up gasping, clutching a severed crustacean claw big as his forearm; he scrambled up almost as fast as he'd dropped. Another time he stopped to pant and noticed a ten-foot brown snake curling around his leg. He leapt to a tree branch, and yelped as the branch snapped. Fortunately, snake and man fled opposite ways.

At last Bone saw fire.

He entered a rocky clearing. Here a cracked stone wall about twenty feet high inscribed a twice-broken circle containing a gray tower shattered at the level of any second-story windows.

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Bone (and his watchers) could not discern the ruin's interior, spotting only some blue-fringed, finger-length lizards darting to and fro.

But the surprise was seeing the ruin in the first place. All had expected Arthane Stormeye's wall of fire to billow higher than a stallion's leap.

Yet the dead god's inferno had crackled many an age. Despite its searing glare, it now rose no taller than Imago Bone's knee.

Bone looked one way, then the other. He shrugged, and stepped over.

The flame nicked his boot, and he yelped, extinguishing it with rapid swats.

The circle of fire vanished. The ordeal was over.

Beside Krumwheezle, Persimmon Gaunt watched Bone sigh and stretch as if shedding some unseen burden. And Gaunt in turn released her breath and reached one hand toward the sun, as if freed of a cage.

Krumwheezle's mouth hung open, as if it yearned to disavow the wizard's skull.

"Oh, Krumwheezle," Gaunt said, in a tone he'd heard only in daydreams. "I feel as though a stone's vanished from my belly. I feel I could soar to the hilltop. Thank you, thank you."

"Well, ah, hm."

"You are the first magic-worker who has really been kind to us. We will never forget you."

She ran recklessly up the dry streambed.

"Wait!" he called. "You should not...." But she was gone.

We will never forget you.

"Wicked, wicked Krumwheezle," he muttered.

Bone had not perished in the flame, nor even been disfigured. But the flame was only half the trap Krumwheezle had set. If the ordeal didn't defeat the thief, the reward would.

Krumwheezle urged himself to ascend the hill, using the exotic arts that might vault him there in a few jumps. He'd want to be on hand to wield the Scruplegore....

Act now, wizard of the Old School. Don't be the weakling Sarcopia thinks you.

But no, he needed to be there to abort his vile plan....

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It's not too late, old man, to be who Scuttlesand and little Molly Mucklecomb and lovely Persimmon Gaunt believe you to be. But in a few minutes it will.

The twin thoughts canceled, and he kept his feet firmly against the earth.

He watched through the circle of pipe-smoke as Bone ceased dancing and skipping and took a second look at the tower. There was no need to proceed...but what thief could resist a quick reconnaissance?

Bone slipped through a gap in the perimeter wall, noted the yawning tower doorway, then climbed the exterior. He reached the shattered towertop and peered down.

Below lay a treasure beyond all coins and jewels.

A pale young woman with long golden hair slept upon a bed of roses. Rubble lay all about, yet none had crushed, cut, or nicked her. She looked utterly at peace, for all that she wore chainmail, with a polished sword at her side and a red-painted wooden roundshield upon her impressive chest.

Armor, roses, and woman should long ago have become rust, mulch, and bones. But the enchantment of old Arthane had remained strongest here, keeping the maiden preserved even as the warding fire dwindled.

This living alloy of strength and beauty stole the thief's silence. "My," he said.

The woman's eyelids fluttered open. She looked upon Imago Bone.

He ducked.

Bone could not understand the words she cried then, but Krumwheezle, listening through his divination, knew his Old Morken.

"*My love!*"

Bone scrambled down the tower in a clatter of stone shards and dust. Sneezing, he hustled for the outer wall.

"*My love, why do you flee?*" The shield-maiden had risen and fled the tower the easy way. Though unsteady on her feet she strode on in rapt amazement. Gestures that might have seemed imploring in other circumstances became menacing, with sword and shield for emphasis.

"I wasn't stealing your gear!" Bone cried over his shoulder in modern Roil. "I'm no warrior! Go back to sleep!"

"*I do not understand you!*" the woman shouted. "*You broke my curse. You are the man of bold heart. Why do you run?*" She stopped then.

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For she beheld the broken wall, the bright emerald foliage, the clear cerulean sky. So too, Krumwheezle thought, she must feel the tropical heat within her armor, hear the chatter of unfamiliar birds. "*What place is this? What has happened? This is not my home.*"

Bone paused at the clearing's edge, not understanding but moved by her obvious pain.

He turned back, held up his hands. "Ah...Arthane...."

"*Yes! Arthane! His will put me here. Did the god send you?*"

"Ah, Arthane, is, ah...." Bone sighed, then mimed the motions of gasping, tottering in circles, and falling dead.

"*My love!*" The shield-maiden sprinted.

Bone squeaked and shot into the undergrowth, not noticing the tangle of cacti directly in his path. He stumbled and howled.

The woman yanked him off the spines, flung him to the ground, kissed him.

"*That is for rescuing me,*" she said, as Bone stared upward, short on speech and breath. "*And this is for frightening me.*" She backhanded him across the face.

Krumwheezle's view, predicated upon Bone's consciousness, became mere smoke.

"Wicked, wicked wizard of the Old School," he muttered. He did not move, either to rescue Bone or to seal Bone's fate. He lit his pipe. The flavor was bitter. He breathed out smoke, regarded Gaunt's ascent.

Gaunt moved fast as she could, and that cost her time. Once she lost Bone's path. Once she brandished her machete at an outsized snake. Once she tumbled down a slope, coughing up dust and dry twigs. The missteps cooled her fervor. When she finally approached Castle Nith it was with deliberate pace and a composed if bloodied visage.

Bone was nowhere to be seen.

Gaunt crept to the broken wall. Suddenly a blonde woman in chainmail flashed into the sun. She waved a shining blade as though it were an integral extension of her powerful arm.

"*Name yourself,*" the warrior demanded.

Gaunt would recognize Old Morken, Krumwheezle knew, but be uncertain in speaking it.

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"Answer!"

"Ah, Gaunt. Who are you?"

"I am Nith, Ah-Gaunt. This is my keep."

Gaunt frowned.

"Why do you disturb us?" demanded Nith.

Gaunt mulled that over. "Us?" she wondered aloud. "Is Bone with her?" She shook her head, muttered, "I'm a fool. It was not 'Castle Nith,' but 'Castle of Nith....'"

"I do not understand your words," Nith said. *"But I do not like their sound. Begone, woman of these late days! I must care for my love."*

Gaunt brought her hands together, touched them to her nose, breathed out. She bit her lip. *"His...sister am I,"* she said finally.

(The ruse might work, Krumwheezle thought. Although Gaunt was a thick-boned, pale daughter of Swanisle, and Bone a wiry, darker son of the Spiral Sea, the wizard had observed that Gaunt's skin was pleasantly sun-browned. With less pleasure he had noted that Gaunt and Bone often mirrored each other's expressions.)

After a moment, Nith lowered but did not sheathe her sword. *"Come then, Ah-Gaunt. But if you prove false, or steal my love away, I will cut out your heart."*

Gaunt nodded and entered the dark ruin.

There Bone lay unconscious upon the slab of roses. A purple bruise filled half his face. The other half bled from dozens of tiny punctures. Gaunt knelt beside him, took out her flask, poured water over the welts. She gripped his arm. "Bone. Imago. You must wake."

He groaned, and murmured, "Persimmon...An astonishing dream I had. I was a barbarian's love slave...."

"At last," said Nith, and scooped him into an embrace.

"That would be the one," Bone managed, before being smothered by Nith's hard kiss.

"Enjoying yourself?" Gaunt asked.

"Only...," Bone said, coming up for air, "in an academic sort of way." His tone was light and cheerful. Then he added, "Help."

"Let me think," Gaunt said. "By the way, I am your sister."

"A fine time to tell me. So you can speak to this, ah, fair creature?"

"A little."

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Nith, clearly angry at being excluded, set Bone down gently and wheeled on Gaunt.

"You," she said, "*speak the tongue of free men.*"

"*A little.*"

"*Tell your brother that for mastering the flame, I am his.*"

In Roil, Gaunt said, "Say something pleasant, but not too affectionate."

"You have nice eyes," Bone told Nith.

Gaunt said, "*He says, how came you here?*"

For a time Nith's proud face looked shrunken. Her eyes peered through her tangled hair like those of a beast in a cave, waiting for the rain to stop.

"*It was Arthane Stormeye who cursed me. I was a shield-maid, proud and powerful, heir to this land. I declared no man should have me, save he who loved best and bravest.*" She smacked fist against stones. "*Stormeye put my boast to the test. He cast me into endless sleep.*" She stared out through a jagged crack. Sunlight seeped in like yolk through an eggshell. "*Now all the world's changed. How long have I slept? The folk of this age are strange.*" She looked at Gaunt, then at Bone. "*But it matters not. All my sorrow is repaid. Strange or not, the bravest heart is here.*"

"I did not follow all that," Gaunt said to Bone (though Krumwheezle, observing, understood all.) "It seems our wizard was not wholly astute. Nor I. The true threat was the keep's inhabitant, not the surrounding flame."

"You wouldn't say that, had you seen the flame," Bone said, still training his smile upon Nith.

She patted his shoulder. "I did see it, Bone."

"*What does he say,*" demanded Nith.

"*He thanks you for your tale, but now he must rest.*" Gaunt added, "Look tired," to Bone.

"That is not hard," said Bone, yawning, stretching, and settling back.

Nith thumped the stone with her fist, stood, and stalked out of the tower. From time to time she could be glimpsed through the gaps in the walls, pacing the ruin.

"She does not seem so dangerous," Bone said.

"That is because you are a man," Gaunt said.

Nith stormed back into the tower, hand on her sword hilt. "*Ah-Gaunt,*" she snapped. "*Come.*"

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Bone began to look alarmed, tried to rise. But Gaunt pushed him back down. "I will handle this."

"Surely she'll be reasonable," Bone said, rubbing his bruised cheek.

Gaunt smiled. "When she discovers you are not her promised lover, she will take that oversized letter-opener and decapitate us both."

Bone thought about that. "What if I *am* her promised lover?"

Gaunt stared at him, shook her head in disgust, walked away.

"No, I mean that in a technical sense! Having braved the flame. Gaunt!"

Gaunt waved him off and rejoined Nith. The two paced the black ribbon where the flame once billowed.

"*Am I not fair?*" Nith demanded.

"Excuse me?" Gaunt said in Roil. In Old Morken: "*What?*"

"*He fled from me. Now he feigns sleep — I am a warrior, I know the look. Am I so foul? Men once called me beautiful and strong.*" Nith's gaze grew distant. "*But the world has changed. Perhaps I have as well. Tell me, does a village yet stand below in the valley? Do the clanhouses rear bright with their dragon-carvings and do girls scatter alpine flowers through their hair? Do raiders launch from the sparkling fjord at left, and mountainfolk ski the shining slopes at right? Does the mead splash golden and sweet? Do skalds sing the sagas of beauty and woe? Or is all that is left...a crumbled keep in a noxious wood...and a rescuer who'll have none of Nith?*"

Gaunt could only shake her head.

(And whether in confusion or pity, the watching Krumwheezle could not know.)

But Nith had no patience left. The distant look went hot. "*Answer!*"

Gaunt struggled to find words. "*Time...ends...all.*"

"*Is it my lot to die alone, last of all my kind? Answer!*" Nith drew her sword with a smooth arm and a metallic *ting*. She let it catch the tropical sun. "*How will he answer?*"

"Krumwheezle," Gaunt muttered. "We need you."

"*I do not understand you,*" Nith said. "*But I suspect now that you and he mock me. Whoever you are, I will not be mocked. He will be mine, or he will die. I have waited too long.*"

* * *

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This was what you wanted, old wizard.

Krumwheezle let the pipe-smoke drift away on the ocean breeze, taking the vision with it. All was now tranquil.

One way or another Bone would be out of the picture. The wizard would offer comfort, and in time would claim Gaunt's heart. Whether Bone perished or took Nith's hand was Bone's affair. Fair choices for a thief.

This was what you wanted.

Krumwheezle looked down at the warm surf soaking and relinquishing his old bare ankles. When the water hissed back out, the skein of light crisscrossing the submerged sand expanded and steadied. He could see little finger-sized shadows milling among the roiling grains, then pale ghostly fish swam into vision, like tiny glass speartips. The surf foamed back in, and all became a brilliant blur.

We will never forget you.

It seemed to him then that all magic's bright lore was as transient as the darting of the fish, for a brief span sharp and meaningful, then lost in froth and glare.

Thank you for fixing my toy.

Snarling in a way that would have terrified the children of his village, the petty-mage of Scuttlesand flung his pipe high up the slope. And when it clattered onto a patch of bramble, he was there, cursing and coughing. And when he flung it again and it tumbled amid cacti, he was there, howling and shaking his fist. And when he flung it again, and it splashed into the water of the natural well, he was there, retching and weeping. For he was a wizard of the Old School who had never graduated. For he was, after all, a common and unworthy man, and for all his dark and secret Art, could not cut the ordinariness from his guts.

WHEN KRUMWHEEZLE reached the summit, scalded from steam, stained with the broiled meat of the Thing from the well, his pipe lay twisted in the charred circle, Imago Bone danced along the jagged wall, and Persimmon Gaunt crouched outside with drawn bow.

"Master Krumwheezle!" Gaunt said with relief. "Our translation was lacking. I somehow mistook the genitive for the accusative. *Nith's Castle*, not *Castle Nith*."

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"The eighth declension," he panted, "is irregular with proper names. Warned you I was rusty."

A warrior woman with blonde tresses leaned through a gap in the wall. She snarled in red-faced rage, ducked back inside.

A rock clove the air and narrowly missed Bone's head.

"That would be Nith," Gaunt said.

"Mm."

Gaunt studied him, narrowed her eyes. "Have you an explanation for this?"

"I cannot explain the heart."

He stepped forward. There came a bellow from beyond the perimeter, and Bone stopped his dance. Slipping through a gap Krumwheezle found the shield-maid scaling the wall, mail and all. Mountain-bred, Nith would not concede Bone the high ground.

Bone waved at Krumwheezle, and began descending the other side.

Before Bone vanished, Nith removed her shield and threw.

It grazed Bone's skull. The thief fell.

Krumwheezle heard Gaunt's shout of anger.

"*Nith!*" the wizard cried in Old Morken. "*Cease.*"

Nith turned, scowled, leapt to the ground. The impact sounded jarring, yet Nith seemed indifferent. She snarled, "*And who are you?*"

"*I am a wizard...of the School called New when your people built this keep. I can capture shadows and domesticate demons. I know how to snuff the bright fire behind the eyes. Rarely have I done such things, but I know how.*"

"*What are you doing here?*"

"*I am here because I tried to be something other than what I was — a failure.*" He tapped the Scruplegore at his belt, felt an icy prickle. Then he raised his hands. "*Be at peace, brave Nith. Gods and wizards have played cruel games with you. Your people are gone. Your rescuer is a vagabond with no great battles to his name. I sent him hither...not to help you, but to help myself to his lover, Gaunt. He is not for you. Accept life as it is. Let go of glory. Quench your fire.*"

"*I — was — promised!*" Nith's face was scarlet. "*The great heart would be mine, the god said. Who are you to deny me?*"

"*I am Krumwheezle.*"

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Nith charged him then, so Krumwheezle added, "*I am wind.*" And he was conscious of motion only, and of flowing away from his clothes, spreading and shifting through a dozen different cracks in the wall.

And of leaving the Scruplegore behind.

He sprawled into being upon the pebbly earth, naked. He'd had no time for nuances. And already he heard Nith sprinting through a gap.

Options were limited. Though Krumwheezle boasted of demon-calling and soul-snuffing, in truth he'd little experience with the deadlier arts. Rising, he invoked the Algebra of Atmospheres (the temperature of the ground is *a*, O ground — could it not be *z*?) But naked as he was, the only weather he was inappropriately dressed for had to be *cold*, and therefore highly unlikely.

He iced over a small patch of ground.

He fled as Nith stormed into the open. He was rewarded with the sound of a gasp and a thud.

Rounding the wall, Krumwheezle came upon Gaunt kneeling over Bone. The thief's left leg twisted at an unhealthy angle.

Gaunt pulled twin daggers at Krumwheezle's approach.

"She comes — " Krumwheezle gasped.

"This one's for you," Gaunt said, and threw.

The dagger sank into Krumwheezle's left leg. At first he was astonished at how much steel could hurt. Then he simply hurt.

He screeched and toppled, staring at the hilt jutting up from his calf.

"Yes," Gaunt said, "I heard your speech to Nith. I understood enough. All the time, you knew she was here."

Krumwheezle could only moan, looking upon Gaunt's rage.

Then Nith ran around the bend.

"Now you," Gaunt said, and threw again.

The warrior-maid dodged, and lost an earlobe, not an eye.

She howled and bore down upon Gaunt. The poet rolled, but Nith clipped her right foot, and the sword rose again, bloody.

Then Imago Bone, who'd seemed too agonized to act, kicked savagely with his good leg.

Nith stumbled. Then she knelt and punched Bone in the face. He slumped unconscious.

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But now Gaunt limped back into the fight. She grabbed Nith's arm. The warrior maid dropped her sword.

Nith seized the grabbing arm and threw Gaunt against the ruin's wall. Before Gaunt could regain her feet, Nith was upon her, kicking for the stomach. Gaunt fell and didn't rise.

Through his pain, Krumwheezle noted there was clearly a reason Arthane Stormeye once favored this warrior. The rogues could never prevail, save perhaps at night, in a blind alley. But Krumwheezle did not flee. He crawled to the fallen sword. He whispered an incantation. "*Be a good horse.*"

The sword shot on its own accord into the undergrowth.

Nith saw it too late. In one breath she grabbed Krumwheezle by the throat. She reached down to her belt, and held up the Scruplegore.

"*I believe this is yours,*" she said. "*Let us see what a wizard blade can do.*"

"Nith," came a weak voice.

Still gripping wizard and dagger, Nith wheeled and confronted Bone.

The thief, wheezing, seeping blood from the mouth, crawled toward her. He stopped, mustered a shadow of dignity. He patted his chest, reached out his hand. "I — am — yours," he said to Nith. "Tell her, Krumwheezle."

"I...cannot...," Krumwheezle managed to gasp. "You...are Gaunt's."

"You must. You know you must."

Krumwheezle sputtered in Old Morken, "*Nith...he accepts.*"

Nith blinked at Krumwheezle. He wondered if the words had penetrated her fury. Then she tossed him aside. She dropped the Scruplegore as well. It dove point-first into the ground by Krumwheezle's nose, as if he lay upon moist earth and not dry, pebbly ground.

The blade flickered with unearthly green light. He felt a chill upon his face.

Nith knelt and embraced Bone. "*I knew you would prove true,*" she said, sounding less the hellion, more the frightened young woman far from home. "*I knew. So much is lost. I am so alone. The world could not be so dark. It could not be so dark.*"

"She believes you," was all Krumwheezle managed.

"Well," Bone sighed, shutting his eyes. "Here we are. We shall live here like happy warriors, eating roast snake. You'll take care of Gaunt?"

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The Scruplegore's green fire steadied and brightened. Krumwheezle felt a cold, raw vitality seep into his limbs. He could sense ten years sliding away like a tattered old coat.

"I...."

He looked at Gaunt's unconscious form: she who hated him. "I will," he said, and staggered to his feet, watching the glowing dagger.

"I will take care of her." He turned away from the Scruplegore and knelt beside the preoccupied Nith. He pulled out the monocle ground with moonstone. He set it over her right eye.

"*What...*," she began, then slowly grasped the monocle for herself, like a child clutching a new toy.

"*See*," he hissed.

And Nith saw.

"*You*," she said to Bone, eyes wide. "*You are no warrior. You are strange, and like me you have lived under an enchantment. There is both youth and death about you. You are valorous in your own way. But it is your way to sneak behind life's troubles, not engage them! And you are not for me.*"

She turned to the unconscious Gaunt. "*You...are a beautiful soul. With your words you plant flowers at the very gates of doom. This man suits you. I am sorry we fought.*"

She lowered the monocle and stared at Krumwheezle. "*You spoke true, wizard. All the world is cruelty and pain. I am alone, and must accept that. This man is not a monster. But neither is he for me.*"

"*You must see the rest*," Krumwheezle said, shame goading him. "*You must see the evil in me.*" He reached out and raised the monocle again to her eye.

"*You....*" She sucked in her breath. "*There is bright and dark within you, cool blue light and wild red flames. You are as fierce and proud as anyone alive, yet to claim your full power you must become wicked. And that you will not do.*" She lowered the monocle. "*You are not my perfect rescuer either. You are...much like me.*"

This Krumwheezle had not expected.

Nor the gentle touch of her calloused hand.

Nor the tinkle of the Scruplegore snapping in two.

* * *

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"It is a small village," he told her when they sighted Scuttlesand. *"Their concerns are fish, children, fish, the eccentricities of their neighbors, and fish."*

"I will defend it to my last breath," she said, her strong arm about him.

The four travelers limped into the solarium, though less painfully than they might, for Krumwheezle knew some healing Art. It was coming to seem odd, that he'd despised himself for not being able to rain fire from the sky, say, when he could mold an upside-down castle, mend broken limbs, make children laugh.

"My companions," he said beneath the sparkling net of the wavetops, "you are welcome to stay until you feel fit to travel." He watched Nith out of the corner of his eye, for he still couldn't believe how she felt about him. But Nith merely watched the rogues, as if he could only be referring to them. She had learned enough Roil on the sailboat to follow his meaning. Her expression said, *I will be here much longer than that.*

Poet and thief shared a look.

"Do you want to stay?" Gaunt said. "You were injured worst of all."

Bone's eyes met Krumwheezle's, and for a moment the wizard saw the flash of anger in them. But the thief looked away, smirked, swatted his leg. "Say it nice and loud, will you? The tale of Imago Bone, Nith's practice dummy. No, I think we will be leaving. We've much to discuss, and my favorite place to discuss is a little seaside tavern outside Palmary, where the spirits burn like sweet success, and the women," he looked at Gaunt and checked himself, "the women are welcome."

"We do have much to discuss," Gaunt said. "Let's consider all that has happened, good and bad, as writing upon a wax tablet. A new day's dawned, and the wax has melted. We take leave not as friends, but not as enemies either, Wizard of the Old School."

Krumwheezle bowed. "I will not use that name anymore. I am the petty-mage of Scuttlesand. Use that title when you speak of me."

And Krumwheezle looked out the solarium glass, far away to where the shards of an ancient dagger lay drowned above an inverted sea. ☙

Thanks to Phoebe Harris for the Old Morken poem and asides on translation.

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The Tomb Wife

By Gwyneth Jones

"IN LAR'SZ' TRADITIONAL society," said the alien, "a lady would often be buried with her husband. A rather beautiful custom, don't you think?"

The Active Complement of the interstellar freighter stared at him, slightly alarmed. Their companion, the illustrious "passenger" who had elected to share their vigil, liked to play games with their expectations. They never knew when he was joking. Humor glinted in Sigurt's black eyes — sharply diamond-shaped as to the rims, a curious and attractive difference from the Blue Planet oval.

"No, no! Not *buried alive*. Not like that, not at all. She would live in the tomb: she would retire there of her own free will, to spend the rest of her days in peace and solitude." He reached a claw-like fingernail to scratch his ear. "Lar'sz' nobles and peasants continued the practice well into historical times. It's the sons of the soil and the owners of the soil who preserve old cultural features, isn't it? And the dispossessed, of course. Refugees."

They were gathered in the mess: seven Blue Planet humans, vital

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components in the freighter's wetware: plus one celebrated alien archaeologist. The hold was laden with precious ancient artifacts from Sigurt's World, on their way to an exhibition. The Cultural Ambassadors and their staff were making the crossing in dreamtime, but this black-eyed, shadow-skinned, graceful creature preferred activity. They were not clear — they weren't good at reading the small print — whether "Sigurt" was a generic name, or whether their archaeologist was also the actual "Sigurt" who had made first contact. None of them had yet dared to ask him.

It was a pleasant, low-ceilinged saloon, decorated in silver and green, the traditional color scheme of the young culture of interstellar transport. Light gleamed from above like sunlight through leaves, the floor had the effects of grass and mosses. They sat around a blond wood table, actually extruded ceramic fiber, that faithfully recalled polished birch. The air was fresh and sweet, the whole impression was as if they were in a roomy tent, a pavilion pitched in sunny woodland, somewhere in the Blue Planet's beautiful temperate zones. But outdoors the blizzard raged, pitiless, unimaginable. The hum of the torus was never-ending; they no longer heard it. And if it ever stopped, that deep subliminal murmur, they would not have time to notice it was gone.

The Active Complement had just found out — Panfilo Nube, Payload Officer, had discovered the small print of the manifest, in an idle moment — that one of the pieces in the hold was supposed to be haunted. It was a tomb, but the ghost was not the official owner, so to speak. It was something called a "Tomb Wife," some kind of ghoul associated with tombs in Lar'sz' culture. Nadeem, the moody, black-browed Homeostat Commissar, had asked Sigurt — half joking — was this spook definitely dead? They didn't know much, but they knew that the people of Sigurt's World were very long-lived, with a propensity for long comas when times were hard. Sigurt had answered cheerfully that one could not be absolutely sure; and hence the explanation.

"A Tomb Wife did not provide for herself, you see," he continued. "She was a hermit, a *sadhu*." He smiled at Nadeem, who did not smile back. "Her family or her servants would supply food and necessities, but they never saw her. Among the peasantry of course the widow simply went to live in the graveyard, in full view of her neighbors. Her exclusion from society was formal, ritual...."

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Rafael, the young Assistant Navigator, frowned uneasily. "But how can you say you're not absolutely sure she's dead? The relics down there are thousands of years old, aren't they? I don't mind, I'd just like to know. A ghost is cool, but a thing that lives in a tomb and isn't dead, well — "

In a starship's psychological topography, the hold is always *down*. Nobody laughed. Rafe suffered from transit nightmares, an affliction as crippling as seasickness — but it didn't affect his efficiency, or his passion for this strange ocean.

"I think we can *assume* she's dead," said the mischievous alien. "In the records of Tene'Lar'sznh, the royal house to which this princess belonged, it's noted that the food-offerings first went untouched about fifteen hundred years ago, our time. That's about four thousand of Blue years, I think?"

The Active Complement nodded hurriedly, in unison. Vast timescales made them nervous. A little less, thought Elen, the Navigator. She was intimately aware of the relation between a Blue Planet "year" and the same period for Sigurt's planet; as she was aware of every detail of the impossible equations of this journey. She wanted to put Sigurt right, but how would she reach the end of that sentence? But *when*, in what relation, at what particular moment? She closed the floodgates with an effort.

"The food went untouched?" she repeated. "And that's how they knew? So, what did they do, when a Tomb Wife's food 'went untouched'?"

"Nothing at all." Sigurt's pointed teeth flashed: the modified aggression of a grin, which seemed to be a constant of humanoid life. "How quick of you, Elen, you're exactly right. A lady of rank did not allow herself to be seen, once she'd taken up residence. Her servants or family would continue to supply her needs, but they were forbidden, by the lady's own will and testament, to go looking for her, and the tomb could be a large and complex building. Nobody would know *when, precisely,* the offerings became offerings to the dead." He paused. "Isn't that beautiful? After a year — or thereabouts, depending on the liturgical calendar — the undertakers were allowed inside. The lady's remains would be found and there'd be a funeral. In the case of our princess, however, legend has it that no remains were ever recovered. And that is how this particular tomb became known as 'haunted.'"

"She probably legged it one dark night," decided Rafe, with relief: and

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then blushed. "Uh, sorry if that's a poor taste idea, Sigurt, no offense."

"None taken."

"Aren't *you* a Lar'sz'ian, Sigurt?" wondered Carter, the burly ship's doctor, who wore the captain's armband. "Larziote, Larzy-ite, however you say it?" Carter was one of those people who have to assert themselves in the presence of celebrity or renown. He had a horror of showing deference to anything or anyone.

For a moment the alien bristled, a startled double-take of affront, thought Elen (although she couldn't be sure). The Lar'sz' were now (when is *now*, *where* is now?) an impoverished, short-lived remnant. The famous tombs, temples, ruins, were scattered over scratch-dirt, subsistence farming desert country. Maybe it was like telling a Brazilian you'd thought he was Portugese.

"My family has Tene'Lar't ancestry, but it's a long way back."

Nadeem the Commissar shifted in his recollection of a birchwood chair: restless with thoughts he knew nobody shared. "Why do you say 'Tomb *Wife*,' Sigurt? Why a *lady*? You beings don't *have* our two biological sexes."

Nadeem was a Diaspora-denier. He would bore the socks off you explaining, interminably, how actually there was *no* uncontroversial evidence that all planetary variants on the sentient biped model, all the possessors of "numinous intelligence," capable of interstellar transit, were descended from a single species. He passionately refused to accept that the original species had been a hominid from the Blue Planet — a precursor of Homo sapiens who had flourished and vanished, leaving only the faintest and most puzzling of traces. *It's only a theory*, he'd insist.

And yet the man was a scientist.

You had to excuse him (they *did* excuse him, they were very tolerant of each other's foibles. Sigurt shared this trait, or he could not have joined them). You had to remind yourself that believing that the Earth was the center of the cosmos had once been good science and sound common sense, and many eminent scientists had clung to the old model, long after the new facts arrived.

Diaspora-deniers favored the term "beings." They thought it made them sound rational and agnostic; which it did not. The rest of the Actives called their illustrious friend *an alien*, without embarrassment, because

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at home *alien* had become a term for the much-loved human practice of bodymorphing, and they'd forgotten it might be offensive. Sigurt didn't seem to mind. He called *them* "Blues."

He was not just eminent, he was an original, a Blue Planetophile. His skill in "Blue" languages had not been acquired for the sake of this trip; it was his hobby in real life. He had no trouble dealing with Nadeem.

"Ah, good point." He pondered, raising his eyebrows, which were commas of black velvet, the same texture as the close mat of hair (or fur) that covered his skull and extended down his neck and across his shoulders, glimpsed at the throat of his ship-issue green jumper. "Let me think. No, I'm sure 'wife' is correct. The *wife* is the one who remains, who cannot tear herself away. This is social gender, not biology."

Nadeem was not satisfied. Ideally, he explained, all self-respecting other beings, when speaking human language, should call themselves *it* —

Elen imagined a dry landscape, a dustbowl sky: parched mounds with small stone markers (the graves she envisaged were Muslim, somehow). The burial ground was sown with sad hunched shapes outside little cardboard shacks; the villages were depopulated of grandmas. Did the tomb-wives really choose seclusion? Or were they compelled by the iron hand of custom? Which nobody inside the rules will ever admit is an oppression. The blizzard outside ought to be a sandstorm, she thought, to match their cargo. But it was whiteness she always imagined "out there." A white darkness of quantum vacuum. She noticed that Sigurt had said wives, not widows, though his English was very good; and she wondered about that. They are not the widows of the dead but the wives of the tombs.

"Stop kidding yourself, Batman." Nadeem was getting agitated. "It's not a one-off planetary evolution that we have in common, it's time, gravity, hydrogen bonds. It's an accident of convergent evolution that we look more or less alike. You've let yourself get sucked in to a cheap, tourist way of thinking, denying your own difference, fantasizing that you can *understand* us — "

"You're a racist jerk, Nadeem," responded Sigurt amiably. "Anyway, you just did it yourself."

"*What* — ?"

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The alien raised his arms, spreading the webs between his slender fingers, hooking the air with his claws. "Anthropomorphizing. You called me Batman."

ELEN SUITED UP and visited the hold. The float tube delivered her to darkness, where she drifted from one handhold to the next, following track lights to the main cargo compartment. She flooded the great space with air and pressure, touched down as gravity embraced her, took off her helmet, passed through the lock, and walked into a cavern at the roots of a sea-mount. The habitat a green, sunlit island far above —

The artifacts were crated in force fields, but she couldn't adjust the light above art-conservation level. *Pedants*, she murmured, marveling at the dim, pixelated spectacle. The Lar'sz' part of the collection was the most impressive: so damned impressive you could almost justify the mad expense of the shipping. The haunted tomb was huge, multistoried. It caught her breath. She circled it slowly, calculating that their whole living quarters would easily fit into the Tomb Wife's portico.

There was a single doorway, a black teardrop without a door: set about two meters above ground level, amid a coruscation of carved and inlaid stone. It would be a scramble to get inside. Perhaps the front steps had been left behind, or there was a secret mechanism, something like ancient Egypt. She sat cross-legged, slightly awkward in her suit, gazing. Like most sailors of the strange ocean, she rarely got farther than the dockside when she made landfall. Even if there'd been more time and less bureaucracy she wouldn't have been tempted by a lightning tour of Sigurt's planet. What for? You'd see so little. You'd learn hardly anything.

She'd been interested in the cargo as a professional challenge, a factor in her caculations. The science of transporting massive material objects was in its infancy, and artwork was a *nightmare!* But here in the gloom she felt the value of these things. A virtual Lar'sz' tomb, freighted through the transit in a courier's brain, downloaded into the digital inventories of a limited-release of premier museums, could never have had this presence. The Exhibition was going to be a revelation.

There was nothing to stop them from breaching the force fields for a preview, without the fuzz. No areas were barred to Active Complement

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except the fearsome threshold of the torus itself. She should come back with Sigurt, get him to give her a guided tour. But not the tomb, she thought.

If she went into the tomb, she'd like to do it alone.

The image of a dessicated heap of bones and skin, preserved intact, flitted through her mind. The Tomb Wife in a stone room, an old lady fallen down with a broken hip, too proud to cry for help when she heard her servants arriving and departing. But how old was she? Maybe she was still young when the food offerings "remained untouched." Sigurt would know. She would ask him. Or better, she'd look it up herself, and impress him by knowing something. It was probably all in the background files the Complement didn't bother to read.

If the practice had survived into historical times it could still be happening. *Suttee* had continued in India long after the Brits tried to stamp it out, had resurfaced even in the Space Age. But it was the haunting that fascinated Elen. Do ghosts travel? Did pharaohs and Inca sacrifices ever wake up, bewildered, in glass cases, half a world away from home? Did they wake up in modern times, to find themselves replicated in software? What about a journey so immense that it has no duration? What damage would the relativity storm of the blizzard do to something as fragile as spiritual remains? How embarrassing if the loaned archaeology arrived stripped of its patina and pedigree.... How embarrassing for the fledgling enterprise of interstellar freight, if there should be a Missing Legend incident!

She listened until she was sure she could hear footsteps inside the ziggurat. No, it's okay, she's still there, still haunting. Unhurried, peaceful, timeless, the Tomb Wife was going about her quiet routines.

Rafe had agonized nightmares in which the Lar'sz' ghûl crept around his brain and scratched at his bunk closure: seeking live human flesh. Seriously repentant, Sigurt dredged up (or fabricated) some potent ancient Lar'sz'ian prayers, which he translated into English phonemes, and taught Rafe to recite. Elen had said nothing about the footsteps in the tomb, but she felt equally responsible. She might have leaked it into the shared reality; telepathy artifacts were the bane of starfaring. You learned that you *had to* think no evil of your companions in the matrix, or there would

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be hell to pay. And don't imagine spooks, or somebody will get spooked.

She did not confess. It would only have made Rafe worse.

At the end of a long shift she unplugged herself from the mainframe, meeting as always the adrenaline of panic as she returned to ship-time: clutching at her stomach, icy down her spine. Carter was the captain on this trip, thank God. But Elen was the one who crunched the numbers. She was finally responsible for all the lives on board (not to mention those huge ancient gewgaws in the hold). And the worst was knowing that if — *if!* — she'd let a transcription error get by, it would not manifest itself until the closing phase. Not until too late. That's quantum computing, no way around it.

The terror of the blizzard engulfed her. No radio, no GPS for this ocean. No ground control for this spaceship, not the slightest possibility of rescue. She saved-off their position meticulously, although off-frame storage was nonsense, no such thing as a Black Box; and let the solidity of the banks of instruments and winking screens reassure her. The freighter's official name was *Pirate Jenny* (not that Actives themselves bothered much with names of starships); reflecting the Brechtian, Utopian leanings of the parent company, and its financial partner, the World State of Earth. Other ships were the *Clement Atlee* and the *Eleanor Roosevelt*. Their sisters were the *White Visitation*, the *Sacred Wicca*, the *Caer Siddi*. Elen decided she preferred the occult strand. No Black Box but this is Black Art. We don't know what we are doing; we conjure with monstrous forces, far beyond our control.

Footsteps behind her, a breath on the back of her neck, a mocking sigh.

"So you got out," she whispered, and turned slowly, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Tomb Wife's ghost. Nobody there. She never lets herself be seen —

They grew accustomed to the extra presence. "I blame myself," said Sigurt, but in fact the symptom was a common one, technically harmless in terms of neurophysics: believed to be benign by superstitious Actives. Only Rafe was troubled, and he had his prayers. Sigurt told stories. Nadeem the Commissar and the Chief Engineer flirted. The Assistant Navigator, Chief Engineer's former squeeze, took up with Passenger

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Liaison. Elen visited the hold again, alone. She'd decided against the guided tour.

In the low light, looking up at that black, balanced teardrop, she fell into a reverie in which the Tomb Wife tradition was not oppression but a shimmering resolve. Not to move on, not to let go of the past: to decide, so far and no farther. The princess had chosen to *stick*, as they say in cards, at the grief of loss. To stay with the absence, never to let it fritter away into vague anniversaries, faded rose leaves of memory. Was refusing to let go a feminine trait? Or was it a Blue trait, which she was cutting and pasting onto the customs of another planet? It was an Elen trait. She told people (family, boyfriends, outsiders), that she was an interstellar navigator for the adventure of it. The most exotic of exotic travel. But we do not travel, she thought. Not a step. When the transcription is done — what does *when* mean, where there is no time? — we will make the crossing in almost zero extension.

What we do is stay, in the paradoxical moment —

Without deliberation she stood up, used her sleeve controls to open the tomb's force field, and set her gloved palms on the doorsill. Her suit was limber, designed for active wear. A push downward, a bounce up, she had her knee on stone. As she stood up diffuse lighting welled around her. The tomb had been prepared for visitors. She realized, disappointed, that she couldn't possibly be the first to enter since the Tomb Wife's time: probably not even the first Blue! A short passage led into a stone room, where a table like an altar stood against an inner wall. Above it a life-size mural, in brilliant color, showed two people, same height, same build, sitting opposite each other, informally; knees up. They both looked like Sigurt, in a generic way. They were gazing at each other, their diamond-shaped eyes over-bright, their smiling lips full of sadness. Both had the short cape of black velvet fur. One of them seemed to be wearing a black half-mask. It was this figure who reached to the other, one slender hand outstretched, as if in an unfinished caress. Below them on the altar stood an array of diamond-shaped bowls: a curved platter, a heap of dry rags.

She looked into the bowls. Dead leaves, granular dust —

Are the conventions of mourning a universal constant? Elen thought of Etruscan tombs, Chinese ancestor worship. Her files contained no data, only the vaguest notions, but she was pretty sure that mural was a

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masterpiece. Her gauntleted hand must have brushed one of the artifacts. A label sprang into existence in the air, explaining — in Sigurt's planet's dominant script, in English, and in a third writing she didn't recognize — that the actual bowls and platters had been taken away, with their ancient contents. These were replicas. The dry rags were a replica of the decayed set of clothes that had been found —

The past as theme-park is a universal constant.

She explored the stone corridors of the ground floor, paying no further attention to the artwork: ghoulish and hopeful as a child, looking for the bones that had never been discovered. She found only dust, and very little of that. There were no stairways to the upper floors, and nothing she could identify as living quarters. The artful lighting started to make her feel like a tourist. She took refuge in the gloomiest of the courtyards and sat there looking at another black teardrop, halfway up a wall: quietly visiting the shade of a long-dead "princess."

Immense peace, engulfing spiritual quiet.

She listened for footsteps, suddenly terrified.

Abruptly she got up and returned to the entrance, dropped to the floor.

As she closed the field behind her, embarrassed by her moment of panic in there, a black manta ray swooped across the ocean trench darkness. Elen yelped, and stared around wildly. The shadow cruised again. Her heart was thumping, my God, what is that thing? What's in here with me?

"Who's there — ?"

No answer but the hiss of disturbed air. "*Hey!* Who's there?"

Sigurt landed beside her with a soft thump, wrapping slippery folds of bat wings around him. "Ah," he said, with smiling interest. "So it's you, Elen."

She stared, appalled: open-mouthed. "My God! Sigurt! What d'you think you're doing! *You can't fly!* This is *not* a game!"

"On the contrary," said the alien cheerfully. "The whole universe is a game, is it not? A puzzle-mass of tiny units of information, the pattern of which can be changed at will — given the torus, and the fabulous software implanted in a trained, numinous consciousness. Such as yours, Elen. I'm not the expert, but isn't that the whole basis of interstellar 'navigation?'"

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Elen was shaking with horror. "You can't do this! You can't piss around doing impossible things in the transition! Our lives depend, every f-fucking moment — "

"On our conviction that all this is real," he finished, unrepentant. He showed her the fx controller on his sleeve; and switched it off. The bat wings vanished.

"I can access a toy from the ship's library without damaging the equation, can't I? I was just playing. I'm much lighter than a Blue, and there's not a great deal of gravity in here. I've been jumping off the monuments."

She dropped her head in her hands as relief thundered through her, leaving her spent and hollow. Starfarers live in constant terror, like sailors on the ancient oceans. You don't realize, until you hit a peak, how high the ambient stress is getting —

"Just for the record, Sigurt, there's no software, not the way you mean."

"I know that we maintain all this," he waved a slender hand, shadow-pale in the dark. "Between us...I've never been quite sure how it's done. You Blues have all the secrets. Is it true that Starflight Actives have had brain surgery?"

Sigurt's people had stunning cellular regeneration. They treated almost any trauma as a purely medical problem. The sciences of surgery and (worse!) gene manipulation had come as a horrible shock to them. Barbarism.

"No surgery. No implants. It's more like a tissue culture. You have to have the right kind of brain to start with. The reason you can be awake is because you're like us, Sigurt: but you're a straight, a virgin. We've had the training that makes us grow the extra neuronal architecture, which doesn't, er, exist in normal space — "

"Or you would be hydrocephalic Eloi, with heads the size of pumpkins."

She nodded, though she had no idea what an Eloi was.

They sat with their knees folded up, like the figures in the mural —

"I'm sorry I fooled around, Elen. I scared you. I think I'm going stir crazy."

"Or else you're reacting poorly to racist abuse, Batman."

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Sigurt laughed, and scratched his ear. "*Batman!* Half-domino, cute little shoulder cape. Sounds too girly for my taste. If you like comparisons, we are more akin to frilled lizards than bats."

"Nadeem must really annoy you."

"He is *something I would scrape off my shoe,*" pronounced the alien, with relish. He tipped back his head. "Do you hear that, Commissar? Shoe-Scrapings!"

They started to laugh. The Active Complement lived in each other's heads, accommodating each other as if they'd been workmates for a lifetime. They were a group mind: inhibited, licensed; in constant negotiation. Elen replayed the first remark Sigurt had made. Sigurt had known that someone was visiting the artifacts, but because he was only supercargo, not A/C, he hadn't known who it was.

"I've been visiting the Tomb Wife," she said. "I'm fascinated by the idea of a ghost on an instantaneous transit. Do you know anything more about her?"

The alien shrugged. "Like what?"

The tomb crouched like a massive, patient animal. Ancient artifacts peered at them from the gloom, carving and shaping blurred into a vague sense of *life*.

"Was she old? Was she young...? Did she have a lover?"

"Widows are a danger to social cohesion," said the alien. "The relict of a partnership has to be neutralized, or there'll be mésalliances, inheritance disputes. Therefore the widow must marry again, harmlessly. She must wed the tomb — "

"That sounds very human. Nadeem would be horrified."

Sigurt seemed to think it over. "The ancient Lar'sz' kept state records," he said at last. "And accounts. Not much else was written down. I'm afraid we don't know much. There are the bas-reliefs, but they're high art, highly ambiguous. And not of her choosing, of course. They are the memorial her husband ordered."

Elen wanted to ask *what was her name*, but she was afraid that might be a lapse in taste, a cultural taboo. Another question came to her. "Is it right to call her a ghost? Or did a haunting mean something different to the ancient Lar'sz'?"

"It's different and it's the same, of course."

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The constant cry of one numinously intelligent sentient biped to another.

Sigurt grinned, acknowledging the problem. "Let me try to bridge the gap. In my world we believe that people can, how can I put it, *leave themselves behind* at certain junctures, life events. Someone else goes on. When we speak of a haunting, that's our derivation. Not the, er, spirit of someone physically dead. D'you see?"

"Yes," said Elen, startled and moved. "Yes, I think I do."

She felt that she knew Sigurt better, after this conversation. There was a bond between them, the celebrated archaeologist and the navigator: unexpected but real.

THE COUNTRY of no duration can't be seen from the outside. You can never look back and say *there,* I was. *That's* what happened. Everything that "happened" in a transit was doomed to vanish like a dream when they fell back into normal space. As the *Pirate Jenny* moved, without motion, to the end, without ending, of the paradoxical moment, everyone had a terrible psychic headache. The Active Complement suffered fretful agonies that swamped the ghost, Rafe's nightmares; all their shipboard entanglements. They regarded Sigurt, whose wakefulness was part of their burden, not so much as an exciting famous person, more as a demanding pet. Batman's favorite expression (of course!) set everybody's teeth on edge.

The captain had been interstellar crew for as long as there'd been commercial interstellar traffic, and he could see the writing on the wall. "The *Pirate Jenny* is a horseless carriage," he moaned, in mourning for the sunlit green walls, the mossy ground, the polished birchwood. "Soon it will all be gone, all this. Nobody will bother. Passengers will transport themselves, we'll be obsolete."

"Shut up," muttered Elen, "shut up, shut up, I'm trying to concentrate — "

She was mortally afraid that she'd made a mistake. She scoured the code for a single trace of the ghost (there must be a trace!) found none, and knew she must have missed something. Mistake, mistake. The insensate, visceral memory that she *always* felt like this in the closing phase was no comfort at all.

"What about freight?" Gorgeous Simone, Chief Engineer, looked up

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from a game of solitaire. "Who's going to carry the freight, doctor? Hump it through the indefinite void, if not people like us? Fuck, look at the size of *that* problem."

"Swearbox," piped Rafe, who had grown chirpy while the others grew morose, and was now a rock, a shoal, an infuriating danger to shipping.

"Go and eat your head."

"They'll paint the crates with essence of consciousness," explained Carter, doom-laden. "Or some crazy Borgs will break the Convention. They'll create actual supernuminal 'Artificial Intelligence' nanotech, and inject it into matter."

"So fucking what. You won't be redundant, you're a doctor."

"Ooops! Swearbox again!"

"Does not compute, man! If it's a true AI, it'll have civil rights and they won't be able to make it do anything. We'll unionize it, it will be on our side — "

The alien laid his black velvet head on his slender arms on the tabletop and sighed, very softly. All seven of them took this as an outrageous insult. They'd have fallen on Batman and torn him limb from limb, except that they knew there'd be hell to pay. The navigator quit the saloon and retired to her section. God, let this be the peak. Let us be over the mountain, this is unbearable.

They were over the mountain.

Elen reported their position, news which was greeted with exhausted relief. Now there was nothing for her to do but watch the tumblers fall: watch the numbers cascade into resolution, not a phase-point out of place. She loved this part and hated it —

She went down to the hold to visit the Tomb Wife, for the last time. There was a rumor that they'd all be given free passes for the Exhibition, but she didn't think she'd go. The relationship had been formed here, in the dim-lit cavern under a sea-mount. It wouldn't be the same in normal space. The tomb greeted her with its shimmering silence, with the stillness of a grief embraced; set in stone.

"Hello?" she whispered. "I think I'm here to say good-bye."

She was not surprised when Sigurt joined her. They smiled at each other and sat for a while; but the black teardrop beckoned. The alien

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succumbed first. He hooked his long fingers into twin curves in the carving that she hadn't noticed, and was through the doorway in one movement. There weren't any steps, thought Elen. The entrance is supposed to be like that. She tried to copy his action but couldn't find the handholds. She had to make the same scrambling jump as before; and followed him to the chamber where the partners faced each other, the "wife" poised forever in that gesture of farewell.

Emotion recorded in art was the *rosetta stone*, the only (and frequently deceptive) common language of the Diaspora. Elen wasn't sure what a *rosetta stone* had been, originally. Sigurt would probably know. But she felt she understood the message of that unfinished caress; the speech in those bright, half-hidden eyes. The dead are gone. The Tomb Wife stayed with *herself*. She stayed with the life that had ended, rather than going on, a different person —

How strange, how beautiful.

Sigurt had gone farther into the tomb. At length she heard him coming back. She didn't have to look around, she could clearly picture him leaning in the ancient doorway. She imagined *staying with herself*, in the country of no duration. As often as she left this homeland and woke into forgetfulness, she never got used to the wrench of parting. Oh, she thought. I need not leave. I can stay. If I hadn't taken this berth, if I had never met Sigurt, I would never have realized that I could do this! With a rush of immense gratitude toward the alien, she knelt, she crept on her knees to the offertory table and settled there, curled against the stone.

"The Tomb Wife was obliged to remain," said the archaeologist, behind her, in a tone of mild apology. "For all eternity, with the partner to whom she was bound. But in special conditions it might be possible to make, well, a kind of exchange. One ghost for another. I may have lied to you a little. In *your* terms, it happened long, long ago. In *my* lifetime, the time I have spent awake, it was not so long ago as all that."

Faintly, in her mind's eye, Elen saw that she had let a transcription error get past her, and what was happening to her now was the consequence. In absolute terms there was no saloon, no eminent alien, no hold full of tombs, there was nothing but the storm, never anything but the storm, the blizzard, and she was falling into it, into the thrilling void of terror that every starfarer knew was waiting —

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Emotion can deceive. The sentient bipeds barely knew anything about each other, as yet. Misconceptions abounded, wild mistakes were only found out when it was too late. A family divided by a single language, thought Elen: knowing at the same time that everything, the stone against her cheek, Batman's deception, was a translation, and really there was only the blizzard. Yet in the last paradoxical moment, annoyed that it had to happen, that she would not stay here entirely, she felt herself splitting, giving birth to the person who would go on.

— and saw herself walking away with Sigurt, arm in arm: glimpsed, through the veil of Elen the Navigator's physical form, the Tomb Wife's caped shoulders, the delicate black domino of velvet fur, the gleam of the lovers' eyes.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH WE'RE pleased to bring you a new story by award-winning writer Ted Chiang. His first appearance in *F&SF* is a lovely novelet set in Baghdad during the Middle Ages. Don't miss "The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate."

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CURIOSITIES

STAR BEGOTTEN: A BIOLOGICAL FANTASIA, BY H. G. WELLS (1937)

THE WAR *of the Worlds* (1898) is a landmark of science fiction. Yet, in all the history of literature, no other novel of such magnitude has spawned so obscure a sequel by the same author. *Star Begotten*, written four decades later (and published in America with a hyphenated title: *Star-Begotten*) must be reckoned as Wells's official sequel to his *War of the Worlds*. Very briefly in this novel, the characters reminisce about those pesky Martians who invaded London two generations earlier. *Star Begotten* is a subdued and moody sequel, with much angst and very little action.

Joseph Davis is a respectable Londoner: married, with a young son and a career as an author of popular histories. (He thoroughly resembles an idealized younger version of Wells himself.) Gradually, Davis becomes convinced that the Martians have begun a second, subtler campaign to conquer Earth: this time the Martians are modulating the cosmic rays that bombard Earth, in a manner calculated to cause gradual mutations in humanity's genome, so that humans will eventually evolve into Martians. In his growing certainty — or perhaps it's paranoia — Davis believes he has discovered evidence that his own son is a Martian...and maybe also his wife...and perhaps even Davis himself.

In *Star Begotten*, the aged and embittered H. G. Wells approached the threshold of Philip K. Dick's universe, depicting a protagonist who can no longer decide what is real, or whether or not "the world isn't some queer sort of put-up job."

— F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

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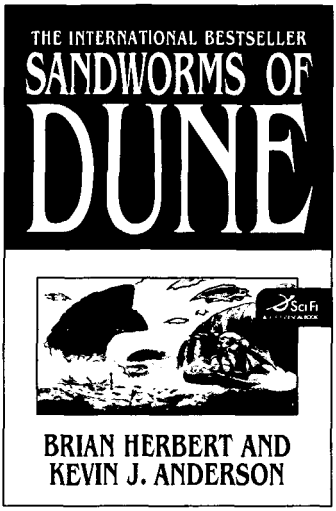

Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson reenter the Dune universe with a novel based on Frank Herbert's final outline, hidden away for years. This breathtaking new novel will also reveal the origin of the Honored Matres, the tantalizing future of the planet Arrakis, the final revelation of the Kwisatz Haderach, and the resolution to the war between Man and Machine.

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—SciFi.com on *Hunters of Dune*

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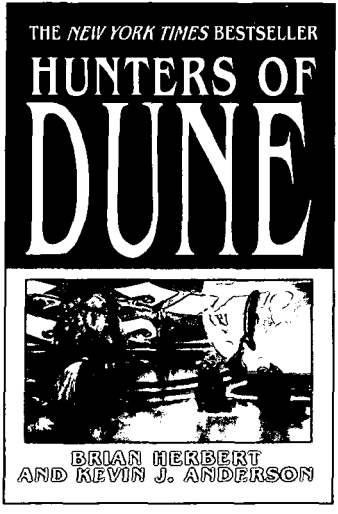

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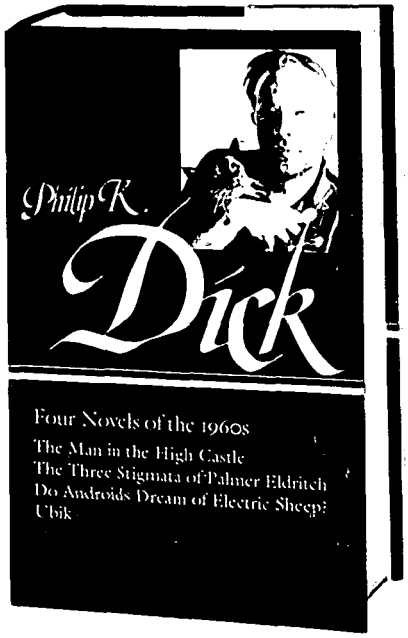

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